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DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
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Most the essays in this volume of the Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature, except the first and the last, were originally presented at the first seminar of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Comparative Literature, in December 2005. The focus of this meeting was "Literature as Knowledge System". Syed A. Sayeed is Reader in Philosophy at Aligarh Muslim University. Amita Chatterjee is Professor of Philosophy and heads the School of Cognitive Sciences at Jadavpur University. Sundar Sarukkai is Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay is adjunct faculty at the West Bengal Technological University, and guest faculty in the Department of Sociology at Jadavpur University. Kunal Chattopadhyay is Professor of History at Jadavpur University. Epsita Haldar is our colleague in the Department of Comparative Literature. Armando Gnisci's is the only essay in this volume that comes from outside the purview of the seminar. Gnisci is Professor of Comparative Literature and Interculturality at the Dipartimento di Italianistica e spettacolo, Università di Roma. From this number, the editorship of JJCL changes hands. We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude to the outgoing editor, Professor Swapan Majumdar, and trust that his association with the Journal has ended only in form, not in spirit.

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Armando Gnisci

WHAT WE EUROPEANS TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT POSTCOLONIALISM¹

*Antes que os portugueses descobrissem o Brasil,
Os brasileiros tinham descoberto a felicidade.*

[Before the Portuguese discovered Brazil,
Brazilians had discovered happiness]
Oswaldo de Andrade

What with the "Great Migration," at the turn of the two centuries we belong to, neocapitalist globalization and the 25-state European Union, I think we Europeans are in need of a *language of mental union* suited to the new age. Girolamo Arnaldi, at the end of his interesting book, *L'Italia e i suoi invasori* ("Italy and its invaders," 2002), wrote: "Is it too much to hope that a new Western Civilization will form in the melting pot of the heretofore relatively pacific invasions of which we have been the disoriented spectators? For the moment, there is nowhere in sight a unifying force as effective as Christianity has been." This is what I mean by "a language of mental union suited to the new age." As for its substance, I think we have to conceive it in terms of an intercultural spirit, the holy one being no longer a viable possibility. I also believe that we Western Europeans know nothing of this *spirit*. It should start from our mental decolonization, an actual flaying of our selves, as Sartre wrote in 1961, in the Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. What does it mean? I see it as a great reeducation of our minds on the occasion of a second encounter with other worlds, after the one that occurred 500 years ago, a second encounter that takes place on our turf rather than theirs. I think this decolonization-reeducation must happen first and foremost through a common humanism, restarting from Herodotus and Montaigne, along with Sartre. These are the forefathers I have picked.

Remo Bodei's book *Una scintilla di fuoco. Invito alla filosofia*, (A spark of fire. *Invitation to philosophy*, 2005) is an outline of the history of philosophy, an activity born among the Greeks and still vital, though mortified in this age of the decline of education and vulgarity of mass-media. Bodei dedicates a chapter and frequent references to the culture of other civilizations, but does not escape Eurocentrism, conceived in a very bland fashion, as something that "denies or ignores the contribution of other civilizations." Let us consider one of Bodei's passages: after having referred to civilizations based on oral or "sapiential" culture, Bodei writes that "a different situation is that of societies subject to the violent acceleration of historical time, as, for example, in Europe, first with the great geographical discoveries and colonization, then with the Industrial Revolution, and, currently, with the immense development of mass-media..." (33). The argument is very "normal," almost obvious, but it seems to apply only to the exemplary, *but also unique*, case of *modern* Europe, on account of its being subject to the acceleration of historical time, with no reference being made to the propulsive force of this acceleration: capitalism. Furthermore: what happens to Europe, *seems to happen only to Europe*, only on *its side of history*, which is *the* History and still has only one side, even though Herodotus, 2500 years ago, had begun his *Histories* with the incipit "The learned Persians maintain...": he allowed his enemies to speak first.

"Let's screw up a little history and geography," then, as Daniel Pennac says. Geographical discoveries, colonization, industrial revolution, etc., in my vision, cannot be judged today to be *naturally* the monopoly of modern Europe, but must be explicitly viewed as *the first planetary relations*, that is, the first ones that were to be part of a *new and global history: the history of the entire world*. The European idea of "history of the world" is contradictory at the core: it was created by Europe and includes only Europe. The contradiction becomes devastating when we consider the fact that we Europeans have been the *first to falteringly utter this absolutely Eurocentric thought. Because up to now the only sense of world history has been the Hegelian one: that is, the one in which the subject that makes and knows history is the Spirit who makes and knows history as its own; his name is Western, his last name Europe*. After Hegel,

all we have done has been to move the West westward, towards the United States.

Let us rapidly survey modern history: European Atlantic nations, small or large, became centrifugal and imperial and, starting from the late 1400s, shaped the history of the planet. Precisely *dating from that moment*, that is, from modernity, *also and necessarily*, other things became part of that history: the "discovered" worlds, the violently colonized civilizations, their predatory exploitation and slavery. European "conquests" were "catastrophes" (which continue to occur, as China Achebe tells us in his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*). Catastrophes for those who were discovered, colonized, enslaved, etc. In other words, *all this happened also to them*, on their side: the one that my Argentinean friend Walter Mignolo has called *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*. And every time we speak of "modern history," we must *know how to speak precisely* of this unfortunate rub. All this may seem obvious to postcolonial scholars, but I am convinced it is not; neither for them, nor for European historians or philosophers. A look at our history manuals or even our own essays suffices to substantiate this point. For my part, let me point out how being Italian means belonging to a culture that, even in its higher intellectual echelons, continues to maintain that *its colonial past was a short-lived and insignificant affair*; a past that left no traces, no *post* in other words, and needs no future. And that the Italian Renaissance was a purely universal, magical, eternal, etc., moment.

My discourse intends to shed some light on the continuing and active presence, even in the minds of the more acute European thinkers, of a dark side of the conventional approach to world and history. An approach, which we have been quite pleased to term universal. *Universal: one versus one* side. In the passage I took from Bodei's text and commented on, and in the text as a whole, which I used as an example, one does not perceive a discourse by and on European modernity, but rather the normal, blissful indifference of *oblivion* — as the so-called "continental" philosophers of the twentieth century are fond of saying. Oblivion that does not know its "of what," that does not even realize that something has been forgotten.

I am quite convinced that the decolonization of the European mind, a topic to which I obsessively return, can start from here:

allowing oneself to be led to discover traces, points, holes, seams, leaks, in the paranoid Eurocentrism that automatically inhabits us, and to make an effort to *dismiss it*; trying to think it as on the brink of the border or beyond it; trying not to think it as the natural, necessary, and, above all, only way to acknowledge oneself as and to feel European. You could reply that this is a superficial and hypocritical philosophy, a rehearsed sermon shrouded in obnoxious smoke. You might rightly demand practical and precise indications. I am here among you also for this: read the poem of one of those who fought for the liberty of Angola from the Portuguese, the first President of the Republic of Angola, Antonio Agostinho Neto. The poem is called "Western Civilization" and if you read it you shall see what this definition means for an African colonized by Europeans: immediately and naturally. You will understand that we Europeans do not think the same thing of an Angolan, and that the reverse of our thinking is a relationship: the colonization and massacre of Africa by the Portuguese, French, English, Spaniards, Dutch, Germans, Belgians, Italians, and the Soviet Russians. Keeping this colonial relationship in mind, remember how these horrible events occurred just a few years ago and eventually led to the "revolution of carnations" in Portugal.

While moving in a decolonizing and world-wide European direction, mindful and participative of the flow of migrations and translations, as Salman Rushdie says, more than of the cartographic and geopolitical stations and associated canons found in the manuals of scholars, I stumbled more and more on so-called "postcolonial studies," and it sort of felt like up to now we had been living in the same part of town, without ever meeting. We were neighbours. But in what neighbourhood? I was not transfixed by postcolonial studies and did not become a specialist in them. I immediately began to wonder instead: what are they? What way of knowing is this? From what school, need or deception does this come and where does it go and lead us, beyond writing books and organizing conferences? How can this help me on my journey? And, since I am so interested in it: what do I understand of and what do I know? In what way does it encourage me to think beyond what I already know? How and to what extent has it changed my conscience?

I discovered, at the beginning of my postcolonial self-indoctrination, the book of the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The Decolonization of Mind*, and I was fascinated by and appropriated the word-concept "mental decolonization," feeling it was suited to us European partners; suited and necessary, as in a coin, the heads are necessary to the tails. And thus I began to travel across the magic territory of "postcolonial studies." Most came from the North-West and spoke English. So I read Said, Bhabha and Spivak, Guha and Chakrabarty, Appadurai, Gilroy and Stuart Hall, and the three great Australians: Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, Glissant, whom I was the first to have published in Italy. To these Anglo-Americanized scholars and writers, I alternated Francophone ones, starting with Aimé Césaire, whose *Discours sur le colonialisme*, a little book *nécessaire* I was instrumental in translating in 1998. After a trip to Cuba, I further explored Latin-American culture under excellent guides, Roberto Fernández Retamar and then Walter Mignolo. They made me discover Martí, Ortiz and Carpentier and post-Western Latin-American philosophy. I read and practiced, then, more and more, the Afro-Americans of the North, the Caribbean, Latinos and Africans, including white ones, such as Gordimer, Coetzee and Antjie Krog. At one point, I discovered Gloria Anzaldúa. I brought with me, as a sort of viaticum, Sartre and Fanon: the two faces of the only announced European decolonization, the Francophone path.

In the last few years, I have had a growing awareness of a constellation of thoughts and meanings: the feeling that the Italian intellectual conscience of Italy's colonial past had been definitely silenced and that this argument was really of interest only to English, French, or US scholars of Italian culture; that the Italian intellectual production of Postcolonial Studies was dominated by Italian scholars of English literature and culture who rehearsed theories dominant in North-American and Australian universities. This mostly career-oriented imitation was followed by a publishing and translating activity monologically centered on Anglophone texts, which is creating, in Italy, a postcolonial intellectual fashion resembling the obnoxious postmodern fashion begun in the 1980s. A more modest fashion, however, more disarrayed, divided and provincial, dominated by Anglo-American cultural hegemony, reinforced by scholars and writers that have emigrated to the US from all sorts of worlds, to be welcomed and honored. This, how

to say, academic-editorial patronage has engendered a new multicultural "anthropological and philosophical" apparatus, in the narrow sense of the term — supported by emigrated Africans, Caribbean, Latinos, Indians and Pakistanis, etc. — which has elaborated the *hegemonic global postcolonial discourse*, that is, the discourse that can and must be practiced everywhere, including Europe. In the US and Canada, postcolonial discourse appears perfectly multicultural at the source but does not show its other side, the dark side: the systematic principle of knowing and controlling all areas and cultures of the world. I think it is a strategic academic policy aimed at controlling the world in terms of areas: it is significant that, only in the US, there exists a multidisciplinary sector labeled "area studies"; and it is no chance that in US universities there is a greater number of scholars of Italian literature of migration than in Italy. Back to Europe. Sartre was fully aware, through his work with the poets of the *Négritude* and even more with Fanon, of the necessity for a European decolonization, a change from being colonizers and dominant. This path, however, remained unexplored in European culture, during those very decades in which the colonized (who many term ex-) wrote *with a vengeance*, as Salman Rushdie says, to imperial colonizers, hidden in the North-Western tale of the Euro-Asiatic continent. Thus, today, we are confronted by this insane paradox: European imperial nations have generated modernity, the colonization of all worlds, the hungry and inexorable dominion of colonialism, enlisting, in this "universal" enterprise, technological progress and Christ, sails, cannons, Aristotle, and the heart of darkness that still throbs at the center of London and Brussels, cities of the dead, like Lisbon, Madrid, Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome and Moscow.

It is my belief that either postcolonial studies follow this path to decolonization or they follow no path at all. They shall simply rehash exotic-Yankee multicultural discourses. I also know that if European philosophy does not seize this *dark alien* and place it at the center of its future, it will become more and more an archeological-conference hopping sort of knowledge. A comforting worldliness, a TV format for soul and gossip.

We must reverse the formula of the three Australians. It is us imperialists who must respond to the imperialized, starting with modernity. Yankee postcolonial studies are not enough.

As already mentioned, we Europeans have been for centuries surrounded by a circle of questions we have been deaf to. We do not answer, precisely because we are not even capable of hearing them. Now and then, a Pope apologizes for violent evangelization, or some local tribunal recognizes the rights of pre-American or pre-Australian native peoples. The fact is discussed for one day on a page buried deep inside some European newspaper. Amen. The secular and planetary wheel of the questions of fire — I borrow this image from the title of Eduardo Galeano's formidable trilogy *Memory of Fire* — demands, even more than justice, to be heard and responded to. It demands our *responsibility* in reflecting on the history that is common to us: the ancient Mediterranean wisdom that already knew the law of the bond between all humans: *inter se mortales mutua vivunt* (Lucretius, II, 76 — found in Montaigne, I, XX; this line by Lucretius could be the motto of intercultural European discourse) — and in the revision of that common history, a *mutual* revision, if possible. It demands, as the father of African studies, my friend Joseph Ki-Zerbo, demanded at the "World Conference against Racism" in Durban 2001, at least a "reparation" ("la Réparation"). An elevated critical rethinking of our autistic but arrogant and domineering way of conceiving ourselves at the center of the world, which ensured that the encounter of modern Europeans with the new worlds of mortals be marked by the non reciprocal and disgraceful *trauma*, inflicted by us on them. A trauma we could call with the title of Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*. In Italian the cognate word "*disgrazia*" means "misfortune." Therefore, a *disgrazia*, a misfortune, for the new worlds and for all human and mortal continents; a *disgrace* for us Europeans, on which a philosophical sentence is still to be passed.

We European planetary colonizers — alone at first, and then joined and replaced by our distant Anglo-American progeny to whom we have passed on the white man's burden and torch of civilization (a rather forceful transition, begun in 1898, when the young Anglo-American democracy used the probably self-inflicted sinking of the "Maine" as an excuse to seize the remnants of the Spanish colonial empire and affirm its dominion over the Caribbean and the Philippines and on "its" two oceans): *yankee* and *wasp*, precisely — are *generally* responsible, that is, we are responsible of all humankind and *erga omnes*, to everyone, of our *disgraceful colonization* of the

planet that set in motion "modern world history." We have not answered for and to this for five centuries: *though it is the land of love for wisdom and love for the most human of gods, of true science, of technology and forgiveness. Of beauty and the pleasure of living. The land of all the questions and all the answers.*

At this point let us more vigorously interrogate *Postcolonial Studies*. As far as I know, they do not appear to develop out of the vision I have tried to articulate and they are not interested in it. Even the more philosophized of those thinkers do not dwell within this intellectual horizon. I have discovered instead a mutual consonance between me and Latin-American "philosophers" and writers.

While my vision suggests a path of European decolonization, humbly trailing at the margins of the North-American and Anglophone mainstream, it also requires us to raise from the start the following question: what does it mean to identify as "postcolonial" an *entirely new* study of contemporary world culture, which necessarily manifests itself through Anglo-American forms and people.

In the twentieth century, one of the main roles of humanist intellectuals in countries colonized by Europeans — starting from the *Harlem Renaissance* and *Négritude* — was to proclaim and recuperate a lost identity, starting from the *resentment for the trauma and the loss*, rather than the nostalgic recuperation of an identity conceived as an original and irredeemably orphan condition. Herodotus, in a passage in Book III (1229), which seems almost an aside in the main discourse, writes: "Polycrates was the first among the Greeks, as far as we know, who sought control over the seas, aside from Minos of Knossos and those before him, if any of them dominated the seas; in any case, in the so-called human age, Polycrates was the first, and he had many hopes of dominating Ionia and the islands." Thus, in telling about Polycrates, lord of the island of Samos and of his contrast with the Persian Oroetes, satrap of Sardis, he links his thought to a crucial specification: "the so-called human age" = "*tes dè anthrôpêtes legomènes genes*," that is, the time when the human species, the human race, lost its cohabitation with the gods, and the promiscuous median age, where everything had always a meaning and an answer, ended. Herodotus cites, marks, and narrates the advent of this schism that originated the Mediterranean world and the neighboring areas. It is the gesture that, remembered, guarantees the

legitimacy of the discourse *among ourselves*: humans, Persians, Greeks, Indians, Ethiopians, and since then everyone else, too.

Writers — poets, novelists, philosophers, historians, musicians and other artists — of worlds traumatized by Europeans began to write in the twentieth century as *Herodotus knew he had to do*, starting with Césaire and his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, starting from the moment of this schism. What passed before that moment became entirely, though not suddenly, a *ruined myth* and the traumatic severing of time brought about a fall into the darkness of the white shades, of the transcendent evilness of the invader, the belly of the slave ship, the chains of forced labor, and, finally, into *their own history*.

Writers of the worlds and of migrations began to write *this history*, their history, after the catastrophe that followed the trauma, starting from, as the title of Glissant's novel says, the *Quatrième siècle*, the fourth century after the arrival of the slave ship from Africa to the Caribbean. Postcolonial writing therefore occurs on a worldwide level in the twentieth century. *Which does not mean: starting from the so-called age of independence of African nations after World War II* — as we know Caribbean and South-American nations became independent republics much earlier on; *but starting from when it became possible for them (the writers) to respond to the trauma and to its opaque century-old catastrophe, to the severed and irrecoverable trunk of their history. A response voiced in the worst possible conditions, using the language and the global system of the whites, and with that trunk stuck through their throats all the way to their entrails.*

I think that this *postcolonial index* does not correspond to the historical dimension of *postcolonial studies*. I believe that until we white people of Europe, writers of histories, do not agree to call colonial modernity — inaugurated in 1492 and re-negotiated at the end of 1885 at the Congress of Berlin another "internal" affair — with its real name: *First World War*, issues and ideas will continue to be white.

By definitely going past Hercules's columns in the wake of Columbus and Vasco de Gama, Cabral and Vespucci, Cabot and Magellan, all the way to the Russians, who call Russia all of northern Asia up to Alaska on the other continent, all the way up to James Cook and beyond, Europe waged against other worlds a savage war that yet

seemed *natural in its own eyes*, and called this long dark and shameful period discovery, conquest, civilization, the white man's burden and duty.

After having definitely portioned the planet in Berlin, the colonial nations of Europe ended the first period of their modernity with an infernal twentieth-century delirium, marked by three global wars, *all starting from Europe*: from Sarajevo to Hitler, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Kolyma, the last Tule of horror and Pig's Bay, Viet Nam, Afghanistan and Irak.

After this century of unruly and excessive war, a new age has dawned, which has been stupidly defined by North-Western philosophers and their army of accolades, "postmodern." I think instead it is a terrorist age, in which dominion over the planet and the species is granted by *terrorist capital*: the one that *after* Auschwitz — that is, *after the end* of the horror, the horror that was still alive on the lips of the dying Kurtz — after that moment began a new world history, which we have experienced for a short time, sixty years. The two United States bombs, one based on uranium, the other on plutonium, dropped in 1945 on two cities populated by mortal Japanese — *civilians* who were working, going to school, minding their own business, just like the Arawak and the Aztecs, the Hurons and the Mapuche, indeed, just like New Yorkers on September 11, 2001, *when suddenly and rudely the aliens landed*, — these two bombs, I was saying, represent the *first global terrorist act against our entire species, against the planet, against our common history*. A new folly has replaced the agreement between worlds, the League of Nations. The terrorist determination of Truman and his gang is visible in the decision to bomb Nagasaki after Hiroshima in order to test the second type of bomb, based on plutonium.

The official declarations of the criminal president of the US and of the Japanese government were clear-cut and peremptory: "This is the greatest thing in history," said Truman; "The use of such a destructive bomb is an unprecedented crime in the history of human-kind," said the Japanese.

It is from *there* that what we call postcolonial writers start. I maintain and propose that postcolonial writers must be conceived and called using the Latin term *novissimi*, the extremely new, in the sense of the Christian New Testament, an expression meant to rally the writers of the twentieth

and twenty-first century who express *our* new World and its history, finally told, conceived, said for the first time as the history of the world *of all its inhabitants*, including animals, plants, and people. A contemporary history different from non-history written, imagined and vomited by the sleepless North-Western matrix, told and sold by Hollywood to the entire world.

In rethinking this knowledge from this literary perspective, we may state that the *novissimi* are the writers of the present "literature of the worlds," that *succeeds* the exclusively European dream, the European system, a "planetary" culture, a *Weltliteratur* or *World Literature*, largely limited to the global spectacle-market of the imagination of California.

While it is true that, for many years, the Empire of the ex-colonized has *responded* to ancient metropolises, it is also true that the old central Empire reads without understanding, or intuitively but remains indifferent; in any case, *it does not respond*. Or are we to think that its response is Western *postcolonial studies*, as we European know them, published in the University Presses of the Yankees.

From where should we begin unraveling this knot of our common history? A different history could resemble the one that Anglophone historiographers have baptized *World History*, but the resemblance would be superficial; a different history should decenter and alter this model of history in the direction of Benjamin's "against the grain," which is also Brecht's and of many others, in order to transform it into a *contemporary* history: contemporary to all of us, and certainly located within modernity, but also in the sense that, in trying to listen and understand the history that colonized people have been writing starting from the trauma, we European can also re-write our own history at the same time, and reach the point of being able to write it at the same time and *together*. A hope that we owe to *us all*.

For now, this is what I know as far as the final meaning of my journey is concerned, my *destiny*, as the Iberians say. Let us return, however, to what exists today in the worlds. I believe, and am obviously not alone in this, that the most interesting aspect of postcolonial thought is the affirmation and the effort to write and / or re-write the history of one's people and continents. From this perspective, the Anglo-Indian-

North-American school of *Subaltern Studies* — Guha, Spivak, etc. — has certainly major merits, but it is not the only one.

The moment of the traumatic invasion by non-migrant European invaders, akin to the people who invaded and brought war to Latin Europe after the decadence of the Western Roman Empire, is the starting point for the *novissimi* historians and writers. The traumatic turn, the fall of African empires — who had a history of their own, albeit ruined, up to the so-called twentieth-century decolonization, as in the case of the Ethiopian kingdom of Haile Selassie — as well as the immediate fall of pre-Colombian kingdoms and the expropriation of their destiny, represent, as I noted above, the scalped front of modern history, shared with the Europeans. And it is worth remembering that the Chinese and Japanese empires too have suffered, if not traumatically, what their descendants call “modernization,” following contact with the Europeans. All the way to the Arab and Arabized people, repeatedly conquered, but fighting within the hostility of present conflicts against North-American “globalization” and the *ensuing* European one for which the term “globalized colonization” might be more appropriate. Let us return to the *novissimi*: the history of the worlds colonized by Europeans had been written as “European history in the colonies,” in Cambridge and Paris, by Euro-American ethnographers of “primitive mentality” and by writers attracted to the exotic context of colonialism. Only Conrad in 1899 was able to publish a tragically European history, written, that is, from the European side of a horror that *re-gards* us and begins to cry out, like a person calling “from the heart of his darkness,” petrified by the metropolises of the dead and of obscurity: London and Brussels.

The rewriting of history by the *novissimi* means not only rewriting their history resuming from that point in time in which they had been prevented from doing so — as in different ways are doing the Indian Guha or the Uruguayan Edoardo Galeano — but also writing it with a firm awareness that this writing takes place in the context of regaining, *revanche*, and of a sharing once again donated, of remorse for forgetting, without any hope of returning to a moment before the past. In other words, *translating*, as Rushdie says.

I am saying that what I know is that we Europeans must pursue the same work of liberation, *precisely the same*. If this is how it must be,

we have to, first of all, take our eyes off them, begging them not to leave us alone and promising we never will, and that we will no longer make them uncomfortable. As you see, it is a question of *tact*, as Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia*, yet as hard as a rock made up of thousands of years of war and suffering.

In practice, this means: not rewriting our history in a “critical” and “politically correct” fashion, as done by those who in the last few years have converted and become defenders of the oppressed — though even this would be a major achievement, considering how little has actually changed in the history manuals used in schools and universities. Rather it means, *rewriting modern European history as a general history of the species and world history as history of planetary colonialism: as a disgraceful history*. This is what I think and what I say. Even though all this, in the thought and language of Western *savants*, is academically anti-historic and crazy. Only in this way, can we hope to begin working in the manner of Erasmus from Rotterdam. In Europe we know how this is done.

I know that all this is necessary in order to be able to write a world history from the perspective of Europeans, as Herodotus did in the 5th century B.C., when he realized that the time had come to write history from the perspective of humans and no longer from that of myth, and that history had to deal with the conflict between Persians and Greeks, which involved the entire Mediterranean world. Writing as Paul and Augustine did when they posited Christ as a turning point in the *new* history of human-kind; as Montaigne did, after a century, having read and reflected on what he knew of the New World, west of the Atlantic European coast where he lived. Which, following his primary source Lopez de Gómara, he viewed as the only epochal novelty after the coming of the Savior, a thought echoed by many other Europeans, then and in the following centuries.

We must learn to acknowledge the modernity of Montaigne, who hails us in his advertisement “To the Reader” with these words: “For I assure you that if I had lived among those nations, which (they say) yet dwell under the sweet liberty of nature’s primitive laws, I assure thee I would most willingly have painted myself quite fully and quite naked.... Therefore, farewell. From Montaigne, June 12, 1580” (trans. Charles Cotton).

The "self" that Montaigne had been so pleased to imagine and evoke for himself, had no descendants. It remained tied to hypotheses and dreams. Or, if it ever was turned into history, it was only within the dispensable history of exoticism or the disgraceful one of the nightmare that Europeans exported to the Americas and other worlds of the world, disturbing, *since then forever* the life of those places, where people minded their own business and were, according to some of their posthumous poets, happy.

[Trans. Gabriele Poole]

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. My title echoes the title of a famous short story by Raymond Carter : "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love".

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THE COGNITIVE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE

In this paper, I want to make a rather simple point about the cognitive function of literature. It would not be a point worth making except that it seems to be increasingly overlooked in studies of literature. The point is this: literature has a cognitive function but it is a mistake to identify it with knowledge understood as we normally understand the term. I believe that this mistake has led to a distorted perspective on literature and has encouraged the tendency to reduce the study of literature to a branch of history or a form of sociology.¹

There is one procedural point I must make before I go any further. I shall be making a number of related claims in this paper. I will not, however, attempt to argue all of them. On some points I will assume some, at least tentative, agreement, and try to discuss the other points using the former as a sort of backdrop. It is not my assumption that the points I make here without argument are self-evidently correct. It is just that this paper is part of a dialogue with those who agree on those points and are interested in sorting out the disputed points. Such a procedure may appear dogmatic but is unavoidable in a short paper on a topic like this.

To explicitly state the claim I am making in this paper: the primary function of literary texts is to give enjoyment, which primarily consists of the pleasure of **looking at** things through the semi-transparency of language. However, this is not a sterile pleasure. Literature makes use of this pleasure to perform an important cognitive function, which explains the cultural value of literature. However, contrary to what some cognitivists seem to assume, this cognitive function does not consist in providing knowledge of some sort. The cognitive function of literature consists in activating understanding or in providing what I call 'reflective understanding'.

Now, before proceeding further, it would be better if I clarified what I mean when I use the terms 'literature' and 'literary text'. But first let

Now, since I have designated the exploitation of the extra-conceptual resources of language as the defining feature of literature, I must explain what I mean by the 'extra-conceptual'. My reference here is to a simple and quite familiar feature of language. Nevertheless, I shall briefly explain what I mean by it. After that I shall try to articulate the distinction between knowledge and understanding and then try to explain what I mean by saying that literary texts attempt to activate understanding.²

To know, strictly speaking, is to have correct beliefs about something (more precisely, to have justified true beliefs.)³ One could also say that to know is to be aware of facts. Some philosophers would object to this latter description on the grounds that in an important sense, facts are themselves *products* of cognitive processes and consequently cannot be *objects* of those processes. However, for the purposes of the present context, one might refuse to get drawn into the philosophical debates relating to the viability of such concepts as 'facts' and 'propositions' etc., and express the same idea by saying simply that 'to know is to be aware of what is the case'.

What is important to note is that this process of coming to be aware of what is the case requires concepts. And concepts, as we all know, are by their very nature structural. That is to say, concepts are always elements of a system and there is no such thing as a single, isolated concept. Knowledge can be said, in this sense, to be gained through an organisation of experience performed through a system of concepts.⁴ Though there are debates as to the extent of the role played by conceptual systems in the cognitive process, hardly anyone would deny that conceptual systems are a necessary part of that process.

It has always been assumed, generally, that whatever their origin and their determinative role, conceptual systems are embodied in language. This is of course true as far as it goes. But as recent philosophical theories have pointed out, it would be a mistake to imagine that a conceptual system and (what we take to be) its linguistic counterpart are necessarily coterminous. I want to discuss this lack of fit between conceptual systems and their linguistic embodiments at some length since this is what makes literature possible in the first place.

To describe it in the Saussurean schema, language consists of (a system of) signs, which have two dimensions, the signifier and the

us understand what it means to try to give this sort of clarification. A complete definition of literature would include its function, if it has a defining or at any rate characteristic function. I do believe that being a central component of human cultures, literature does have a definitive function. And as should be obvious by now, I hold the view that providing understanding is the defining feature of literature. However, this approach has a circularity that makes it useless as a basis for discussion. The reason is that if I designate a certain function as the defining characteristic, then that function simply becomes an exclusionary criterion. Whatever does not have that function, would simply be denied the status of literature and that is the end of the matter. In such an event there is nothing to argue, nothing to prove. Debate in such cases amounts to the stubborn confrontation of two opposite definitions, which would not be a very productive state of affairs. Therefore, in the present case, I will try to give a minimal, but what I ultimately regard as an incomplete, definition of literature. My claim would be that the minimal definition I offer as a point of departure is sufficient to identify literature, and that having agreed to the identity of literary texts on that basis, one could reasonably try to debate whether literature as represented by those texts can be seen to be engaged in performing the function under question. To put it simply, I am here trying to treat the question 'what is the cognitive function of literature?' as non-definitional. In my view, the primary feature on the basis of which a literary text can be identified is that its effects are wrought through an exploitation of the extra-conceptual resources of language.

The next question would be: what criterion would I consider appropriate for settling the question as to the proper function of literature? My answer to this question is: if we accept that a certain mode of operation is the defining feature of literature, then we must ask, what is that function which can be performed or performed best only by that mode of operation and in no other way? I suggest that if we use this criterion, we will be able to see that it applies best to the function of providing or activating understanding. One of the consequences of such an approach is that, once we identify a text as a literary text (on these grounds), it does not oblige us to accept every function it may incidentally perform or is made to perform as a literary function or regard every effect wrought by it or is extracted from it as a literary effect.

signified. The signifier represents the material component while the signified represents the conceptual or ideational component. Now, in this way of looking at the sign system that mediates our intentional relation with reality, the signified is considered to be coterminous with its corresponding concept. This amounts to the claim that language consists of just sounds (or graphemes) and concepts. If this is the structure of language, the question then is: where do we seek the locus of the play of language, its connotative, rhetorical, metaphorical aspects? Evidently, it is not to be found at the level of the signified since the signified is identical or coterminous with the concept, and concepts are largely rigid entities with more or less distinct boundaries (although necessarily interdependent since they constitute a system) that are governed by logic, that is to say by a set of fixed rules. When you operate with concepts you get propositions which obey the inflexible principles of logic. But we know that language (I mean any natural language) is not like that. It is not, for instance, like mathematics, where, barring some problematic areas, each concept remains confined to its definition, each proposition abides by the axioms on which it is based and each operation has a set trajectory. That is the reason why, to the despair of logicians, a logical account of natural languages is impossible. There is clearly an extra-conceptual component in language (understood as a sign-system) which renders it unruly. The logic-rhetoric dichotomy refers precisely to this fact — logic denoting the conceptual dimension and rhetoric denoting the extra-conceptual dimension. So, where is this extra-conceptual dimension to be sought? What is its locus?

Those who wish to persist with the Saussurian schema tend to locate this component at the level of the signifier since there is no third category available. However, the problem with this move is that it amounts to identifying the extra-conceptual dimension with the materiality of the sign since in the Saussurian model that is what the signifier represents. This is a problematic move and has been responsible for the temptation to try to explain all sorts of things — from art and culture to social conditions and political developments — in terms of the materiality of the signifier. The fact is that the extra-conceptual represents a separate dimension of the sign-system which is related to the conceptual but is autonomous in the sense that it is not governed by the rules that govern the conceptual domain. The linguisticity (if we may use this

term to refer to the extra-conceptual dimension) of the sign-system does not constitute a system in the strict, formal sense of the term. There are no fixed, well-defined rules that govern its behaviour. Nor can its dynamics be explained in terms of deviations from the dynamics of the conceptual domain. In other words, this domain is creative. As a consequence, when, having to deal with a concept, we pick up a sign, while we focus our attention on the conceptual aspect of the sign, its linguisticity follows its own law-less path.

As we all know, the relation between the conceptuality and the linguisticity of sign-systems has been a matter of rich philosophical discussion in recent times. Philosophers like Derrida have, as is well known, suggested that the relation between the conceptual and the extra-conceptual dimensions of language is not contingent but necessary and complex, and pointed out that the very distinction between these two dimensions is untenable. According to this view, the purity or self-sufficiency of the conceptual dimension as a system is an ideal, or more accurately, an illusion. The extra-conceptual dimension, far from being external to and derivative of the conceptual dimension, lies at the very heart of the latter — somewhat like the undecidability that, according to mathematicians, resides at the heart of any formal system. When we look at the roots of conceptuality we discover that metaphoricality and all that is entailed by it constitute the conditions of possibility of conceptuality. That is to say, the very notions in terms of which the domain of conceptuality seeks to remain autonomous and meaningful are themselves products of metaphorical moves. Fundamental notions that define language and thought and their operations are, at their most initial moment, themselves metaphorical. Another way of saying this is to assert that language is essentially a metaphorical phenomenon. Our attempts to impose logic on it, and confine it to a systematic conceptuality are ultimately doomed to failure. Inasmuch as philosophy represents this ambition — at least since Plato in the western tradition — to keep a certain region of language free from the wild play of metaphoricality (characterised by literature) and render it into perfect accord with logic, philosophy is a self-defeating enterprise. Similarly, what makes translation so problematic is essentially the extra-conceptual dimension of language. The extra-conceptual dimension is the unconscious of language: it is irrational and subversive. But, just as it would be misguided to imagine

that our psyche can achieve an autonomous rational integrity free from the dark control of the unconscious (since our conscious mind with all its logic and rationality is only a superstructure built on the foundation of the unconscious), so is it naïve to think that we can achieve a pure conceptuality undistracted by linguisticity.

While this analysis of language as a sign-system offers profound insights into many aspects of mind, world and life, how far the manner in which it is used as a methodological premise to deal with the practice of science, philosophy and literature is, I think, still an open question. While it is doubtless true that the non-conceptual surplus of a sign (that we have called 'linguisticity') can always play mischief with our conceptual discipline, to portray the actual behaviour of language entirely in terms of an inescapable and irredeemable chaos resulting from this phenomenon would be incorrect. For one thing, while it is true that linguisticity, not constituting a system, follows no fixed rules, its behaviour is not always unfamiliar or unpredictable. When we learn to use language, we do not learn only to deal with concepts; we also learn to cope with the extra-conceptual dimension: we learn to deal with unintended puns, unwitting metaphors and unexpected paradoxes. Moreover, in most cases, contexts take care of things. It is true that contexts are concentric rings that extend to infinity, but usually people know where to stop, since life situations that constitute most of the normal contexts are finite and familiar, and commonsense is sufficient safeguard in most cases. In short, the possibility of the extra-conceptual dimension getting the better of language is ever-present, and there are many interesting and even valuable insights into our understanding of reality that can be gleaned from an exploration of the many modes of that possibility, but it is incorrect to exaggerate its actual incidence and the putative impossibility of communication resulting from it.

However, whether or not conceptuality is always and everywhere at the mercy of linguisticity, the fact relevant to the present discussion is that many interesting effects can be achieved by deliberately exploiting the linguistic surplus represented by the extra-conceptual dimension of language, consisting of 'connotation' at the level of words and metaphor at the level of expressions — and the several tropes and devices based on them. Literature is precisely this activity.

In ordinary, day-to-day communication, we try to stay close to the conceptual dimension and manage to keep linguisticity under control — for instance, by making sure that a metaphor keeps to its intended trajectory. Occasionally, mishaps do occur but remedial measures by way of clarificatory moves are usually available. In the scientific discourse, the mischief perpetrated by linguisticity is avoided by fiat: that is, a word is not allowed to be more than a well-defined concept.

Aside from this, the conceptual domain is vulnerable to another source of confusion. This is connected with the fact that the conceptual domain itself does not constitute a perfectly integrated system in which all the concepts are in perfect mutual accord. The totality of our conceptual system is an unbounded ensemble of several language games derived from several sources, operating with varying levels of complexity, some acquired from the latest contexts of knowledge and some retained from the most primitive occasions of experience. There are always many misalignments, and many paradoxes resulting from the juxtaposition of differently oriented language games. The philosophical tasks of conceptual analysis, adjustment and integration attend to the job of resolving these paradoxes and bringing coherence to our conceptual system by bringing the logic of different conceptual subsystems into alignment as well as by drawing attention to the ways in which linguisticity can affect the conceptual domain.

All this, in any case, is to do with the mishaps that occur in our conceptual activity and the possible ways in which they can be avoided or their worst consequences contained. In sharp contrast to this is the endeavour of literature which, far from avoiding the dangers of linguisticity, embraces them. Its endeavour is to make use of precisely what constitutes the problem for the conceptual domain: the fuzziness and the ambiguity that creep into the abstract concepts due to the friction caused by use in contrary contexts, and the spillage that occurs — due to shifts of perspective and other such factors — in the correspondence relation between concrete concepts on the one hand and objects and qualities on the other. Through these, literature seeks to exploit the resemblances, proximities and overlaps that are found among sounds and meanings, among objects, qualities and relations. In short, literature represents the attempt to exploit the linguistic surplus of our representational structures.

The question then is this: to what end or ends does literature exploit the linguisticity of the representational structures, using its various tropes and devices? One answer to this question of course is that there is pleasure in this play: there is enjoyment in an intense indulgence of any faculty, any skill, and the skill of language is no exception. But the other important question — for those who claim a cognitive function for literature — is: what precisely is the cognitive objective which cannot be achieved by remaining confined to the logic of the conceptual? It is in answer to this question that I suggest that literature *as literature* is *primarily* concerned with understanding. Let me elaborate.

Let me first clarify that I am under no illusion that I am making a novel proposal. That literature is concerned with understanding has been suggested by many thinkers — such as Nelson Goodman and Gadamer for example — although from quite dissimilar perspectives. What I am trying to do here is only to clarify some aspects of that idea so that the theoretical moves made by these thinkers can be brought into greater convergence. At the same time I must clarify that I am not using the term understanding in exactly the same way as these thinkers do. I do not look at understanding exclusively in terms of 'interpretation of symbols' as Goodman does, or in terms of 'fusion of horizons' etc as Gadamer does. What I have in mind is the much more ordinary, and much more general, notion of understanding, which we all employ in all sorts of ordinary contexts. Also, I think Goodman and Gadamer are concerned with *how* understanding is achieved. My concern on the other hand is to indicate *what* constitutes understanding. However, this is a very difficult task since understanding is a primitive notion not reducible to other concepts in terms of which it can be defined or analysed. Therefore I shall content myself with *indicating* what understanding is and mention some of the ways in which it contrasts with knowledge.

Let me begin with the simple assertion that to understand is to make sense of what is presented to consciousness. But the same can be said about knowledge also. Therefore, to get a better purchase on this notion, I suggest that we look at a few contexts in which the term 'understanding' means something quite different from 'knowing'. However, let me clarify that in attempting to make this contrast, I am not assuming that the distinction between knowledge and understanding is always quite clear

in common usage. There are cases where the two terms are used almost interchangeably. For example, there is hardly any difference between saying 'he understands French' and 'he knows French' unless we mean in the former case that he can only understand but not speak or write, which is not very obvious unless indicated by the specific context. More significant are the cases where understanding is regarded not as synonymous with knowledge but as involving some sort of knowledge: When we say that someone understands a rule we mean that he knows how to apply it. And there are cases where the distinction is quite elusive: for instance, it is not clear if there is a difference between saying that someone *knows* the meaning of a passage and saying that someone *understands* the meaning of a passage. However, my point is that notwithstanding such cases, there are cases where we cannot subsume understanding under knowledge, where understanding can be seen to represent a distinct cognitive relation with reality.

Now let us focus on those cases where knowledge and understanding appear fairly distinct.

One knows a fact, one knows an object, one knows the layout of a city, one knows what is the case. On the other hand, it makes no sense to say that one knows a poem, a joke, or an epigram or a metaphor. Of course one may know a certain poem, a joke, or an epigram, in the sense that one has read it, can recognize it and even reproduce it. However, this is different from claiming that one *understands* that poem, joke or epigram. The same can be said of a mathematical theorem. Now, one way to capture this distinction is through the notion of meaning, by saying that facts are known while meanings are understood. Though as a point of departure it is a useful move, it is necessary to be aware that it is not without problems. As I pointed out a while ago, there are cases where it makes sense to say that one knows the meaning of something. Secondly — and this is more important — we use the word 'understanding' also in contexts where the notion of meaning is not very appropriate. For instance, I may say that 'I understand a person' (significantly contrasting it with knowing a person), but it doesn't sound sensible to say this means that 'I understand *the meaning of* the person'. Further, in some cases, although we may use the term meaning as the object of understanding, it is very difficult to say what precisely we mean by it: for instance, when we talk about the meaning of life or the meaning

of spirituality. In such cases we try to substantiate what we mean by 'meaning' with the use of words like 'significance', which, while perfectly useful and meaningful concepts in themselves, are hardly illuminating as elucidations of the notion of 'meaning'. However, whether 'meaning' is the object of understanding or not, I think these instances suggest unambiguously that understanding constitutes a separate cognitive category.

Still, even after isolating the cases where understanding is distinct from knowledge, it must be realised that drawing a simplistic contrast between knowing and understanding is hardly helpful. Knowledge and understanding are not parallel, non-convergent phenomena. They are related to each other in complex ways. To touch on just one aspect of the relationship between knowledge and understanding, some sort of knowing seems to be a prerequisite for understanding. For instance, it seems correct to say that to know the intention of a person is to understand his action.

This would seem to imply that knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of understanding. The task then would be to find out that feature whose absence makes knowledge an insufficient condition of understanding. In the mean time, it is sufficient to note that there is a cognitive phenomenon that is distinct from knowledge — a phenomenon that is not reducible to some species of knowing (a less rational, less logical or more intuitive mode of knowing), but is a totally different cognitive relation with reality constituting an irreducible category.

One can flesh out the notion of understanding further by mentioning a few more features that characterise it. One such feature is that understanding transcends language. We understand pictures, situations, patterns and feelings. To do so does not seem to involve the translation of the objects into some linguistic form. Another feature of understanding appears to be that (unlike knowledge) it is not necessarily exterior to the affective dimension. That is, emotion can play a positive role in understanding. Another crucial feature is that there is a sense in which consciousness, understood as the capacity for experience, seems to be essential for understanding. A machine that can do successful pattern-recognition may be described as capable of understanding. But that would be a rather contrived extension of the term.⁵ In fact, one might

go so far as to say that understanding is a fundamental feature of our consciousness.

But what precisely characterises understanding? I think understanding is primarily the apprehension of relations, more specifically the integrative relations. Understanding is concerned with the organisation of awareness into a unity. It is the seeing of the landscape rather than the particular objects that compose the landscape. Here, however, there is one important point that must be noted. When we say that understanding involves an organisation of the awareness of facts into a unity, we must realise that there is no single 'correct' unity. There can be several perspectives based on different principles of integration. Therefore, while it is certainly not absurd to speak of a 'true' understanding, it would be a mistake to imagine that the notion of truth that we use in the context of knowledge can be applied here. Inasmuch as understanding is a matter of the formation of perspective, we cannot talk about a 'correct' understanding in terms of its correspondence to reality. It would be possible to say that one perspective captures the reality better than another on a certain agreed basis of evaluation. But that's all. Further, there can also be many modes of perspectival experience. For instance, one mode of perspective can be to look at the different objects (facts or whatever) within a frame in terms of their mutual relations, while another mode can be to relate the facts within the frame to those that lie outside that frame—spatially, temporally or conceptually. Within the latter mode, there can be further types such as the inductive mode of looking at the facts of a certain event in terms of their universality or the converse, deductive mode of looking at the facts as instances of a general law; there can be modes of perspectivalising an object by relating it to other objects in terms of relevance, significance, value, and so on. Each of these modes can permit of several perspectives. Therefore, perspectives cannot be subjected to a two-valued logic. They can only be graded along a certain agreed axis.

In terms of form and content, we could perhaps say that content can be known, while form can only be the object of understanding. This idea can be more accurately expressed by saying that understanding is a matter of grasping the structurality of a structure. Yet another way of approaching understanding is to state it in terms of interpretation by saying that understanding is that cognitive satisfaction in which

interpretation terminates. By interpretation here I do not mean the narrowly understood textual activity but the fundamental inclination of consciousness to constantly make sense of all its objects, which is in fact the very essence of consciousness.

To try to put together the rather scattered remarks I have made about the nature of understanding: understanding is the illumination of the landscape of knowledge and experience. More simply, to understand is to make sense of what we know and feel. Understanding, in this sense, is an integral part of our capacity to experience, but is distinct from knowledge. To know is to form a correct or at any rate adequate picture or conception of (some part or aspect of) reality and thereby evolve correct beliefs about it. Knowledge so defined does not necessarily entail an understanding of the reality so captured in that knowledge. In other words, knowledge provides the objects of understanding but cannot anticipate the outcome of understanding. That is to say, it is possible to know everything about something and still fail to understand it.

Therefore, to grasp the nature of understanding, the best way might be to focus on those occasions when there is failure of understanding: Occasions such as when someone just cannot see the point of a story, or see the significance of a certain action in spite of having all the relevant information; when someone is unable to see the picture even though the full picture is in front of him. However, we must realise that since understanding itself is a type of object suitable for understanding, it will not be possible to describe in definite terms the insight one gets into it by observing cases of its failure. This fact, I think, is responsible for the reluctance to use understanding as a cognitive category. It is undeniable that what we might call the positivist pressure is felt everywhere, on all branches of the human sciences. The response to this pressure has been either to retreat into a discourse that refuses to engage in analysis and argument, or to strive to mould one's discourse into a form amenable to a positivistic treatment. The notion of understanding is clearly not amenable to a positivistic treatment and consequently there is a tendency to avoid recourse to this notion. However, I think that if we can resist the positivistic pressure, we can see that understanding represents a valid and important category.

I am aware that the few remarks I have made are far from adequate as an articulation of the nature of understanding. But I hope my remarks

did succeed in giving some idea as to what I think we mean when we speak of understanding. I think that is sufficient for making sense of my claim that the cognitive function of literature consists in activating understanding or in providing 'reflective understanding'. Let me now explain what I mean:

It appears to be a fundamental principle of reality that unless resisted through an input of energy, existence moves towards disintegration. Our capacity to experience is no exception. Our experience, understood in the inclusive sense of perception plus thought and feeling, too is subject to degradation. By this I mean that the integrity of our experience both in terms of intensity and unity is prone to deterioration, due to various factors such as fatigue, familiarity and indifference. When this happens, our consciousness becomes incapable of integrating the elements of its object into a perspective, of locating them in a net of relations, which intimate the object's full reality. What is involved can be described as the process of erosion of significance. In the state of deterioration, all the elements of an experience, the facts that constitute a situation for example, are accessed by consciousness in a scattered, disorganised fashion. The individual facts, or individual aspects of facts, are perceived, sensations are registered, thoughts are generated, but they are not all integrated into a cohesive frame that conveys the meaning of that situation. In such a case, the experience can be said to represent an absence of understanding.

Sometimes, there is an integration of the elements of an experience but the integration is mechanical and follows predetermined paths towards a familiar pattern that has become more of a habit of thought or emotion. What is attained in such a case represents, not understanding itself but a memory of understanding or a simulation of understanding.

I think literature attempts to restore understanding to experience, or more accurately it attempts to restore and enhance the integrity of experience and the awareness of its significance, which constitutes understanding. It performs this task by unsettling the predetermined, mechanical channels of perspective formation representing the established links between objects and the over-familiar conceptual structures that mediate the apprehension of those objects. Literature makes use of the linguisticity of our representational structures to achieve this objective. Let me explain.

To explain what I mean, I shall make use of a distinction made by Immanuel Kant between 'determinant judgment' and 'reflective judgment'.⁶² According to Kant, determinant judgment occurs where the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given and the judgment simply subsumes the particular under it. But when the particular is given without a universal under which to subsume it, then it becomes necessary to seek out the universal under which it can be subsumed. What this implies is not a discovery of a universal that already exists but is hidden somewhere. It implies the creation of a principle that is neither borrowed from experience nor totally arbitrary in the sense that it must do justice to the nature of the particulars it seeks to unify.

Now, I want to slightly modify, or rather slightly enlarge the scope of this distinction and suggest a dichotomy of 'determinant understanding' and 'reflective understanding'. I think that in scientific as well as in ordinary contexts, we do constantly unify and organise our awareness into larger, more complex units. We use conceptual structures to perform this integrative task. In the case of science, the conceptual structures are constituted by complex theories, whereas in ordinary knowledge situations we use more familiar conceptual structures that are embodied in ordinary language. However, the integrations so achieved have certain limitations. Being governed by given conceptual structures and they cannot deliver perceptions that are not amenable to the categories implicit in those structures. As a result, after some time, our perceptions cease to be real perceptions and end up as functions of our conceptual structures. In a significant sense, in such cases our contact with reality gets compromised. The limits of our conceptual structure then become the limits of our universe. The process of cognition becomes a matter of mechanically applying a set of conceptual structures for certain events. Such a situation can hardly be said to represent understanding. But more pertinently, this mechanical understanding or this memory or simulation of understanding as I have called it, denies access to new modes of contact with reality, denies fresh events of experiencing reality. We end up as prisoners in the prison-house of ready-made conceptual structures.

Literature attempts to change this through recourse to the linguisticity of our sign systems. A literary text shatters the conceptual grid by refusing to abide by the discipline of the conceptual domain

which is governed by strict denotation and rigorous logical relations. It breaks our mechanical conceptual habits of thought and perception by forcing us to focus on the extra-conceptual dimension. When the reader is compelled to pay attention to the sound of a word and its associative resonance, he wakes out of the trance of mechanical denotation. Similarly, when he is compelled through a metaphor to perceive an object in terms of the concepts that are reserved by the rules of the conceptual structure for another object, his perception of that object breaks out of the pattern imposed by the earlier conceptual framework. When this happens, the elements of an experience are set free and they seek a new integration that is spontaneous and real. In this sense, the activation of understanding occurs.

To put it in terms of the dichotomy I have borrowed from Kant, literature, by exploiting the linguisticity of our representational structures, dismantles the given frameworks of concepts to describe, interpret, explain or evaluate something and creates the space for forging new frameworks. In this sense, literature activates understanding or creates the conditions for reflective understanding so that the scope of perception is enlarged, and contact with reality is renewed through a fresh event of understanding, which enriches our experience. Such enrichment of experience is a source of deep creative satisfaction and this satisfaction is the most valuable gift of literature.

To conclude, literature does not give us knowledge, if by knowledge we mean true beliefs or correct information (even organised information) about the world. What it offers is the delight of experiencing the freshness of new understanding.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Literary texts are heterogeneous entities and among other things, they may contain factual assertions too. If the sociologist or the historian wishes to make use of those facts, there is nothing exceptional in it. But in using a literary text as a source for social or historical information, if he claims to be studying literature *as* literature, I do think he is making a questionable claim.
2. In the 'nomothetic' and 'ideographic' divide concerning the cognitivity of literature (to whatever extent that dichotomy is justified) I must declare myself, on the whole, on the ideographic side. I do believe that literature

gives us, not awareness of the general features of things from which law-like assertions can be derived, but awareness of those features of a thing that make it a unique object. I am also inclined to find a definite correlation between 'ideographic' awareness and 'understanding'. However, I am not exploring the precise nature of that correlation in any great detail here.

3. We also use the word 'know' to refer to possessing skills, but in the present context my reference is to what is called propositional knowledge. My contention is only that literature is not concerned with propositional knowledge. I have an open mind on the possibility of literature providing knowledge in the other sense although I would expect that there would be many points in this connection that require a careful examination. For instance, if knowing a language is an example of skill-knowledge, then using a literary text to learn a language may not amount to using it as a literary text. On the other hand, a literary text can, and normally does, sensitise the reader to the nuances of the language in which it is composed, and it would be difficult to deny that in this case a literary text is used as a literary text.
4. In this sense, one could say that unreflective experience at the level of raw sensations by itself cannot constitute knowledge. However, in this matter too, I am not interested in going into the philosophical debates about the existence of 'sense-data' and their ontological and epistemic status. All I want to claim is that when we look at knowledge in the sense of awareness of what is the case, we see that it involves the reception and organisation of experience in terms of description, explanation and prediction, through the mediation of systems of concepts.
5. This is a point that is often missed in discussions on whether computers can be equated with human minds etc. A computer or a unit of artificial intelligence that can know the world around it is more easily built. In contrast, a computer that can understand is perhaps a more ambitious goal. A computer can be programmed to compose a poem or a symphony, to create a novel or make a joke. What it cannot be programmed to do is to appreciate the poem, enjoy the symphony or relish the joke. More accurately, the question would be as to what we might mean in saying that a computer sees the joke or understands the poem. In short, the challenge lies not in the creative ability of the computer as much as in its capacity for understanding.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J.H. Bernard, excerpted in *Art and its Significance*, ed. Stephen David Ross, State University of New York, 1994.

Anita Chatterjee

NARRATIVE AND COGNITIVE SYSTEMS

I

The last decade of the last millennium has been witness to very comprehensive changes in the realm of knowledge. Postmodernism has come and gone, having replaced the disciplinary tools of objectivity, rationality and value-neutrality with flexible, adaptive and value-laden tools of interdisciplinary pursuits. The boundaries of knowledge have expanded but the entire territory is still littered with the broken idols of the modernist regime, which should be either removed or restored and relocated in harmony with the new ideologies. A re-appraisal of the entire knowledge scenario is, therefore, the need of the day. In this paper, I propose to explore how changes in the map of knowledge have affected cognitive science in general and theories of human cognition in particular. My aim is to show that to cope with the changing scenario, cognitive scientists of the third generation must take the method of narrative analysis seriously for this method has the power to reframe the central questions of cognitive science. So, understanding the structure of narratives will play an important role in understanding cognitive systems.

This hypothesis might have appeared fantastic to everybody when literature and science were considered antithetical. But now, as literature and science have come closer, thanks to the efforts of the post-modern thinkers, procedural logic of conversational assertions are considered adequate tools for interpreting ourselves and narratologists' like David Herman (2000) are not only proposing a new interface area called 'cognitive narratology' but also putting forward a much stronger claim that narratology is cognitive science. I would, therefore, like to find out how and why narrative — not so much its content but its method — has become so significant in cognitive scientific enterprise.

Let me begin my quest by clarifying what 'cognitive system' means. This term can be understood in at least three different senses: (a) a system

of information / knowledge / beliefs, (b) a set of cognitive states and processes and (c) a system capable of possessing cognitive states and processes. Accordingly, the role of narrative is to be determined (a) as a genre of cognitive artifact, (b) as a proto-theory of cognitive processes and (c) as constitutive of the characteristic features of a narrator.

Narratives constitute an extensive part, if not the totality of, our oral repertoire. But its dynamic structure can convert 'talk' into 'text'. Narratives have a past-centric monological, sequential structure, which are contrasted with conversation having a dialogical present-centric structure. The standard structure of a narrative can be schematised as ABCDEF, while the standard scheme of a conversation is ABABAB. In the former, unidirectional tale emanates from one single point — the narrator — while in the latter the focus alternates between the speaker and the interlocutor. These two polar modes, however, can be combined into the body of a conversational narrative for, the possibility of overcoming duality lies in the nature of a proto-typical narrative. As Rukmini Nair (2002) points out,

"a good story is one that can be taken away by listeners and / or tellers and repeated in other conversations, other contexts and other cultures... The structure of narratives appears beautifully adapted to time — transfer, to taking away, to having and holding in some kind of formal permanence." (Nair, 5)

Another important feature of narrative structure is that its temporal sequence possesses a built-in causal structure, a *why-because* frame, which a listener always expects and looks for. This feature makes a narrative a proto-theory, very useful for understanding the world in which the fictional characters are situated as well as the world around us.

Narratives do not aim at truth but retain the 'sincerity condition' and the 'rationality' of moves. So one can question the authenticity of a narrator, amaze at the gullibility of a listener, but should not demand truth as a criterion of evaluating narratives.³ As Sperber and Wilson (1986) rightly point out, in the context of story-telling truth as a standard is cognitively irrelevant. The infelicity condition of a narrative is, therefore, its implausibility that makes the *why-because* link fragile. Let me explain this point with the help of an example. Suppose a child hears the story of Moin and the Monster from his mother. In the story, the little boy Moin draws

the picture of a monster and the monster comes alive. The mother does not believe that a monster drawn on paper could spring into life but the child believes in his mother's narration. When the child repeats this story to his friend, he does not doubt that Moin's monster is real and that's why he is thrilled and at the same time very scared. In the child's world fact and fiction merge together, yet that does not elevate the plot of the story to the status of a fact, nor does it ruin its chance of being reasonable. Though a paper-monster's turning into a real live monster is a scientific impossibility and cannot be true, yet within the framework of the story, it appeared quite plausible and hence the story could not be branded irrational. In the case of this type of fictional story, the degree of belief associated with the plot lies somewhere between 0 and 1. But even when a narrative depicts a real-life situation, i.e., a fact and not a fiction, the fictionalised manner of its presentation prevents the belief in the plot from being ascribed the value 1. Here also, the belief element will get some value between 0 and 1, maybe, nearer to 1. Hence, "we neither need to make, nor make, any binary distinctions in our assessments of narrative. Indeed, it may be *believability* (plausibility) rather than *belief* (commitment to truth) that is the important criterion in assessing narrative material, both fictional and factual." (Nair, 9)

Most narratives are our common cultural heritage. These are communally tested and receive approbation for their social robustness. They do not, therefore, preserve authorship or ownership, since there is no exact linguistic format to be replicated, as the accepted cultural norms of a society lead the person who is the narrator at that particular point to mould the content. In most cases, the original narrator cannot be traced back, but the narrative continues to live and grow being co-authored by many narrators in multiple versions.

II

In the last section, we have listed the important features of the structure of a narrative. In this section, we shall discuss the relation between narratives and cognitive systems. Let us first look at narratives as cognitive artifacts.

Human cognitive ability sustains and is sustained by some cognitive artifacts. Cognitive artifacts may be physical or mental objects made by

humans for the purpose of aiding, enhancing and improving cognition. A knot tied in a handkerchief, a calendar, a shopping list, maps, charts, calculators, computers — all are examples of cognitive artifacts that amplify human cognitive abilities. Not all cognitive artifacts are made. A Micronesian navigator, for example, uses the night sky in the same way that many manufactured navigational artifacts are used. All cognitive artifacts are not equally potent for all tasks. Narratives are excellent cognitive artifacts in situated cognition and social learning. In social and cultural environment, cognition ceases to be an individual process. Instead, cognition becomes a set of inter-locking socially distributed processes. As Hutchins (1999) points out, cognitive instruments needed to fly a plane are not lodged merely in the pilot's head but they are distributed among the pilot, the members of the crew, the control panels, manuals or flight simulators. It is obvious that in such situations narratives are very handy in integrating different components of the social plays. A narrative by its inner logic enables us to establish spatio-temporal relations between regions of experience and between objects lying in those regions; it aids us in reorganising states and events into intelligible and manipulable patterns. In respect of a narrative, it is possible to adopt relatively distant or intimate perspectives and participants can be assigned roles within networks of beliefs, desires and intentions.

This brings us directly to the role that narratives play as proto-theories or simple theories. Narratives are said to be natural theories about our understanding of the word-world nexus, designed biologically, psychologically and culturally to probe into contexts, frame hypotheses and present explanations of the enigmas we encounter in the daily business of living. Its *why-because* structure enables us to construct and identify chains of causes and effects in the narrated world, rather than just their post hoc explanations. Narrative is also an important resource for analogical thinking. It provides a cognitive and communicative environment in which dynamic, point-by-point comparisons can be drawn between apparently divergent situations and events. This accounts for how human beings make sense of novel experience in terms of source stories that they project upon more or less difficult to process circumstances and events (Turner, 1996). Such narrative projections also lie at the base of thought experiments used copiously by cognitive scientists. It goes without saying that narrative explanations are different from the covering

law model used by philosophers of science. It focuses on a more or less extended chain of particular circumstances bound together by uniquely instantiated causal and chronological principles. Such explanations might involve atomic, molecular or more complex narrative, depending on how many links of causal-chronological chain fall within their scope.

According to Jerome Bruner (1991), narrative is a very important strategy for cognising the world and for the ongoing construction of social realities. The logic of narratives helps human beings in organising and comprehending experience not only of the story world but also of the real world. By employing the story-logic the story-world experiences can be extrapolated in the real world where the experiences to be handled are unfamiliar and alien.

Narrative as a theory is best exemplified in our theory of mind debate. This debate centres on the question: how do we know what is going on in other people's minds? There are two contending views known as theory-theory and simulation theory. Folk psychological theory crucially relies on a style of thinking fundamentally narrative in nature. "It may be that people's everyday folk psychological attributions of reasons and motives to their fellow beings involve processes radically similar to those at work in narrational attributions of reasons and motives to participants in narrated worlds" (Herman, 4). Narratives thus enhance our mind-reading ability. Simulation theorists also draw upon narratives when they uphold that narrative affords an inexpensive everyday means whereby we may gain emotional practice at empathising with others.

In the Cartesian framework, a subject is stated to have direct access to one's own mental states and processes, while other's mental states are to be known indirectly through inferences on the basis of behavioural clues. Hence philosophers assumed that there is a basic asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds. Thus traits attributed to oneself (first person narration) are thought to be easily accessible and they never go undetected. On the other hand, traits attributed to others (third-person narration) are ever fallible and need to be revised in the face of further evidence. In real life, however, the asymmetry does not remain unquestioned. At times, we are surprised to discover traits in us about which we were completely unaware. Besides, our self-understanding very often improves in the light of others' assessments about us. Psychologists have, therefore, come to conclude

that self and other oriented attributions are not as qualitatively different as was once thought. Paying attention to certain narratives can increase the plausibility of this hypothesis. For example, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* spends as much time attributing mental states and dispositions, to her acquaintances, lovers, spouses, shopkeepers, constables and fellow thieves as she does recording her own reactions, anticipations, emotions and beliefs (Herman, 2000).

In a knowledge situation, the knower plays an important role. Any knowledge is said to be an attribute of the knower or the self. According to many psychologists, the self may become what it is by virtue of its relation to the large-scale social order, but narrative may be one of the chief factors enabling the very possibility of this self- society relation.

Narrative method has also been exploited by those cognitive scientists who wanted to establish the fictional character of a body-transcendent knowing self. Dennett, for example, has introduced the notion of narrative gravity to prove his point. Using the theory of evolution as his backdrop, Dennett shows that human beings are compulsive storytellers and they are pre-programmed to spin stories, just as spiders spin webs and bowerbirds build attractive nests because they are hard-wired to do so. While animal activity can be explained by a reactive architecture, human actions result from a deliberative architecture. In other words, intelligent human behaviour is a function of deliberating over possible causes of actions based on the agent's world knowledge and expectations about the results of actions. Human beings, because of their ability to speak, are constantly engaged in the act of self-representation and representing themselves to others. As Dennett (1991) writes,

"... our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee ... but words, words, words. Unlike beavers who build dams to protect themselves, we human beings spontaneously spin stories with these words for self-preservation, self-protection, and self-identity."

Narratives are authored by people in multiple drafts. How do we construct our self-identity then? Without entering into Dennett's theory of authorless narratives, let us see how he explains our self-identity by importing the notion of the centre of narrative gravity. From a physicist's point of view, the centre of gravity is not a tangible physical item in the world. It is a theorist's fiction, which is well defined and comes to

his aid when he is interpreting objects and their behaviour in the physical realm. Likewise, self is the theorist's fiction — the only difference being that the objects of interpretation here are not physical particles but human beings moving about in the world. The myriad tales we humans hear and narrate throughout our lifetimes confer our basic identities on us. The self in this sense is the centre of narrative gravity created by individuals at the intersections where story-telling lines of force meet. We find it easier to organise the interpretation around a central protagonist — each person positing a single self. Presumably, when these story-telling lines are physically erased in the brain by diseases like Alzheimer's, there results a loss of selfhood accompanied by a very negligible sense of identity. Like (the) spider's webs, "our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source." (Dennett, 418) Since the proponents of the narrative self suspend belief in the existence of a real self, they maintain that we are programmed to exude strands of narratives and these stories in turn shape our future activities and our notion of self-identity. All classes of narratives actually perform a psychological trick. They all create an illusion of an authorial /authoritative self, a central *meaner*, so to speak, who is the ultimate producer of the strings of narrative we perpetually weave.

Narrative theorists insist that we always go on telling stories about the world. While post-modernists define narratives as opposed to scientific knowledge, some scientists insist that science is constituted by storytelling and philosophers like Richard Rorty simply conceive of all types of knowledge as stories created by language. Stories fill in the gaps by relating the events to time and place — by tying up the loose ends of the communicative loops, by offering a causal explanation of every account, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly.

III

We have already delineated the possible roles that narratives might play in understanding our cognitive structure and ourselves. The only task left for us now is to find out how narrative was related to cognitive science in different phases of its development. All of us who are interested in cognitive science know that it has passed through three

distinct stages. Cognitive scientists of the first generation were driven mainly by two motivations — to create intelligent machines (engineering goal) and to explain human intelligence through computational models (psycho-philosophical goal). Success of computational explanation, according to them, depends on admitting an intermediate layer of representations between input and output. So to them, the key to understanding cognitive processes was the concept of representation. Their temporal closeness to the logical positivist era led them to search for an objective theory of the mental and very naturally these theories were characterised by de-emphases on affect, context, culture and history (Gardner, 1987). Faced with criticisms from the phenomenological camp — that human intelligence is not a function of sequential algorithmic processing of data but more often a function of tacit knowledge imbibed through participating in a particular form of life — these cognitive scientists tried to store real-world knowledge in the data / knowledge base of computers in the form of stories and scripts. The work of Schank and Abelson (1977) are worth mentioning in this context. Let us consider the following example of a script, which is very familiar to the Artificial Intelligence (AI) practitioners.

Whitman went to Olivia's birthday party. After she blew out the candles and everyone sang he gave her a new truck.

If we understand this script we shall be able to answer questions like 'Why did Whitman give Olivia a truck?' If we have previous experience of attending birthday parties, we shall be able to name at least one song that was sung at Olivia's birthday party. This is how our understanding of stories presupposes some world knowledge, which must be present in a computer's database, if the computer is supposed to answer the questions posed on the given story as intelligently as any human being. Thus computational intelligence of a system is tested by its capacity to appropriately react to stories. Even at that point of time, AI theorists thought that story understanding is important for knowing the world. They derived this insight from the developmental psychologists who told us that human children learn to build theories by listening to bed-time stories, learn to take a particular perspective and socialise through understanding stories that are spun all around them.

The second wave of cognitive science was marked by return to physicalism under the leadership of the brain scientists. During this period, theorists were more concerned about determining how the world is actually represented in the brain and went on to advocate a connectionist or parallel distributed processing architecture as the basis of our cognitive activities. Still these cognitive scientists could not build machines equalling / beating human common sense. So the Good Old Fashioned Artificial Intelligence (GOFAI) theory, which viewed cognition as individual, rational, abstract, detached and general, was soon given up — yielding place to the third wave of cognitive science, the focus of which is situated / embedded knowledge. Theorists in this phase argue that cognition is fundamentally social, embodied (bound up with material aspects of the agent's bodies), not insulated from emotion, concrete (subject to physical constraints of realisation and circumstance) located (both dependent and enabled by particular contexts), engaged (marked by an evolving interplay between agents and their environment) and specific (oriented around contingent facts grounded in highly variable circumstances) (Smith, 1999). This theory of situated cognition has been developed on the basis of three main principles: The Principles of (a) Embodiedness (which says that having a body is theoretically significant, i.e. bodily constraints of an agent give the agent a particular world-view); (b) Situatedness (that upholds that the world is its best model) and (c) Bottom-up Design (which leads to the view that understanding of the lower level functions like walking, foraging, etc., are at the basis of understanding of complex human cognition). According to this theory, in systems dealing with lower level functions, there exists a tight coupling between perception and action, which makes dependence on any high-level cognitive process absolutely superfluous. However, in human-like systems dealing with higher-level functions, some intermediate steps are required to connect the agent's world knowledge and intelligent behaviour. Narratives play an important role in updating the agent's world-knowledge in consonance with his / her expectations. Cognition, thus, comes closer to narrative thinking which is inherently situated and hence rich in implications for theories of situated cognition.

Understanding situated cognition requires some new conceptual tools and methods — one suited to the study of emergent, decentralised, self-organising phenomena. These new concepts, tools and methods will

perhaps displace, not simply augment, the old explanatory tools of computational and representational analysis. Consequently, the familiar distinction between perception, cognition and action and that between mind, body and world need to be rethought and possibly abandoned — causing upheavals strong enough to demolish the existing boundaries in the domain of knowledge.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Research for this paper has been funded by the Cognitive Science Programme under the UGC scheme of the University with Potential for Excellence.
2. Narratology is that branch of knowledge or criticism that deals with the structure and function of narrative and its themes, conventions and symbols.
3. Since truth-claim is irrelevant in the context of narrative, it has always been placed outside the realm of traditional epistemology, the distinguishing feature of knowledge being the possession of a true content.

Sundar Sarukkai

LITERARY REALITY AND SCIENTIFIC FICTION

Over centuries, both science and literature have been involved in creating particular images for themselves. Foremost has been the attempt by science to appropriate the notions of reality, truth and knowledge within its domain and activities. Literature has been a silent partner in this act of appropriation because such an appropriation suited its own image making. Even as much as the discourse of science constructed itself consciously in opposition to the discourse of literature, literature too found ways to consciously distance itself from scientific discourse, which included not only differences in their conceptual worlds but also in the way their texts were presented. They are both parties to the establishment of the common perception that science is intrinsically related to the ideas of truth, reality and knowledge and literature with fiction, myth and imagination. Associated with these categories are various others such as subjectivity (literature) and objectivity (science).

If we critically analyse these claims, we discover that these images about science and literature mask the nature of both these activities. Not only is literature in a surreptitious relation, an illicit affair, with reality and therefore knowledge but so also is science in such a relation with fiction and subjective imagination. So both literature and science allow us to challenge commonly held presuppositions about them. The consequence of such unmasking is to remind us that the ideas of reality and knowledge are much indebted to fictional imagination and fiction itself blossoms from the hard ground of reality and knowledge.

Literature, reality and knowledge

When we talk of knowledge it is usually knowledge of something. Having knowledge of something is related to how the thing really is and thus involves some notion of truth about that thing. When science

claims it generates knowledge about the world it is essentially claiming that it describes and explains the world as the world really is. Thus, it is not a surprise that in general, discourses on reality depend upon the idea of knowledge in various ways.

Let me begin with some remarks on the relation between literature and reality. Derek Allan discusses three views about this relation.¹ One is that literature represents or imitates reality. Another view understands the relation in terms of the capacity of expression, namely, literature as a means through which the author expresses her responses to reality. The third view sees this relation in terms of knowledge and truth. We should note that in general whenever truth and knowledge are invoked they are as tools of validation. So the important concern about literature is not just about the conflict between the fictional and the real but also about how it responds to questions of justification of beliefs, assertions and narrative. If we remove the demands of justification, then science too is literature or equivalently literature is just science. It would of course be wrong to say that literature has no justification since aesthetics does play a regulative role. However, the point is about justification with regard to knowledge and reality. This is a justification that literature does not often ask of its works, with exceptions such as in autobiography and the genre of early Realist Naturalist novel. Yet it is immersed in a complex relation with knowledge and reality. The question is how to make literature acknowledge its indebtedness to the ideas of reality, knowledge and objectivity, terms, which have been excessively appropriated by science. In other words, literature can no longer hide and protect itself within the ambit of the subjective and the fictional but must take responsibility for what it really does in the space of knowledge.

Novitz argues that literature is an important source of knowledge about the real world.² Moreover, literature provides knowledge which is "richer and more varied" than the empirical sciences. Primarily, the question about reality has to do with our description and understanding of the real world, and having the means to compare our description with the world. A scientific work makes an explicit reference to particular physical objects, events or phenomena. But so do literary works. The influential writer on aesthetics, Monroe Beardsley, notes that, "by their nature literary works have an essential and unavoidable reference to

reality."³ The reality that literary works refer to is not only the world of the individual and society but also that of the natural world and our relationship with it. Furthermore, just as we have a notion of scientific reality so also do we have the idea of literary reality. For Novitz, literary reality is the "world in which we live", meaning therefore that there is really no distinction between our 'real' world and the world of the literary. For De Man, the literary reality is the 'phenomenal world', the world of experiences.

However, there is a difference between scientific and literary realities. For Allan, this difference is encapsulated in the observation that scientific reality is "that which is purged of the 'merely personal' whereas literary reality is the essence of the 'merely personal.'"⁴ Thus, literary reality is the world, a real world, of individual experience. As far as the nature of reality is concerned, the experiential world and the natural world are the same. The reality of the natural world is also primarily an experiential one: the world reaches us primarily through an experiential mode. Our belief in the reality of the world rests on a belief that we can distil the physicality of the world from our experience of it. But if this is possible for the case of the 'external' world why is it not possible for the 'inner' world of experiences? Thus, the notion of reality that is available to literature is on par with that available to science.

However, the influential postmodern responses to reality also challenge these conclusions. In the context of knowledge, Novitz notes that for the deconstructionists literature does seem to provide knowledge but literature's reliance on language is an obstacle. Paul De Man expresses this in the following manner :

"Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality' but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those (or like those) of a phenomenal world. It is therefore not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language."⁵

Rather than refuting De Man's characterisation of literature I merely want to point out that the relationship between language and knowledge/information is precisely the central issue for science. It can be argued convincingly that it is science that is actually self-indulgent about

language. Mathematics is the particular language that is privileged by science. It is reasonable to paraphrase De Man to say that it is not "a priori certain that science is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language." Although this statement might seem to run counter to the dominant image of science that relates scientific knowledge with the world, we often forget the prior move that makes this possible. This move lies in the engagement of science with language qua language. There is a long historical tradition reflecting this relationship, beginning with the belief that nature is a book written in the language of mathematics. To do science is to do mathematics, but with some important differences. De Man's comment that we are not sure that language "functions according to principles" which are like that of the phenomenal world is much more relevant for science's use of language since mathematics, at least in the traditional view of it, is far more removed from the natural world of objects but yet describes them most effectively and in mysterious ways! I think his criticism about literature is actually most useful to understand an important aspect about knowledge — it is that knowledge is perhaps not much more than information about the language in which it is represented. This is a lesson that science needs well.

To understand the nature of literary reality as well as its relation with language and knowledge, it is useful to start with a basic discussion on what it means to make a commitment to reality. It is also important to delineate the relationship between reality and language on the one hand and between the real and the fictional on the other. Firstly, consider the issue of reality. The question about reality has many dimensions. I want to consider those elements, which relate the real and terms such as the invisible, the unreal and the fictional. First of all, the domain of the real is far greater than the domain of the visible. For both science and literature the engagement with the world of the invisible is of great importance. For science, this includes its search for entities such as the atomic ones, which are beyond the immediate visible world. The search for the invisible, for science, also includes a realistic view towards non-material real entities such as mathematical entities, ideas such as laws, causal relations, universals and so on. Thus, scientific realism involves accepting as real not only the visible world around us but also a world filled with microscopic entities as well as non-material metaphysical

categories. This is the world of the real for science, a discipline that is often invoked as the paradigm for knowledge of the real.

Such a formulation of the real has strong resonance with various philosophical traditions. Philosophers who believe in the reality of universals, for example, would be committed to saying that universals such as colour or tree-hood exist or are real. Moreover, some of them would also claim that natural kinds also have an independent existence. So, for these philosophers, the real world is populated by particular (concrete) objects as well as abstract universals. They also believe in the existence of a wide range of properties and some relations between them, as also in the existence of individual entities such as events. There are many who believe that entities such as laws and causal relations in the real world are members of the real world. Platonists believe that mathematical objects exist independent of us. Many philosophers believe in the reality of the mind and mental states, as well as consciousness. They believe in the reality of the world of emotions, of the subjective phenomenal world. So to say that literary reality is different from scientific or philosophical ideas about reality, without taking into account the diversity of the inhabitants of this world of reality, would be to make a claim that may not be sustainable.

There is yet another category that problematizes our understanding of reality and this is the category of absence. At one level, the idea of absence is already present in the world of invisible entities. But these are not really absent since they exist at some level, however 'small' they may be. The real idea of absence is about non-existence in the usual sense of the word. In Indian philosophy, particularly in the Nyāya tradition, absence is seen as a 'real' category; one can thus 'perceive' absence. (However, note that these philosophers make a distinction between fictional entities and absent ones.) Even if we do not subscribe to this ontology, we can understand the importance of absence in other ways. One such example is related to the idea of space — absence of matter is what may be called space.⁶ Words make meaning in a sentence through the discursive practice of creating an absent mark between them. The absence of a mark between words actually creates a whole new real world of meanings. We could thus understand reality as being composed of both presence and absence. An obvious corollary of this is that knowledge too must be related to truths both about presence and absence.

The above discussion on the nature of the real makes it all the more difficult to find clear criteria of demarcation between scientific and literary reality. Even the idea that literature is about the 'merely personal' misses the point that the 'merely personal' is enmeshed in a much larger world composed of the visible and invisible as well as the present and the absent. I shall initiate a critical discussion about literary reality by first beginning with the notion of fiction.

Fiction and reality : To what degree should fiction be fictional?

Fiction is in itself intrinsically related to reality. Ideas of what constitutes fiction are related to what is beyond the boundaries of reality or what lies in the realm of the possible and not the actual. However, such characterisations miss a fundamental point about fiction. This point has to do with the observation that every narrative of the fictional actually draws upon, in various interesting ways, the discourse of the real.

Consider a character in a novel. In what sense is this character a fictional one? The character is fictional if and only if such a character does not exist either in the world or is not part of the knowledge we have about people in the world. Let us assume that this person is indeed a character in the writer's imagination. However imaginative this character may be, as a human this character shares a large domain of the real narrative of humans — for example, the physical description of the character is a realistic description (unless, of course, the person is a 'creature' with ten arms and twenty eyes!), the language the character speaks is a realistic one in the sense it refers to a 'real' language spoken by real people, the behavioural characteristics in general are based on various real characteristics and so on. Even this simple example illustrates the inheritance of the real in the fictional. Since knowledge stakes a special relationship to reality, it should not surprise us to find the inheritance of knowledge and truth in the fictional through this relationship to the real.

We can explore this relation between the fictional and real in various ways. For example, we could have a fictional narrative composed of characters or situations that are real but something else makes them fictional. A story could be set in Kolkata invoking the various real places in the city as part of the story. The story could be inhabited by the

sights, sounds and flavours — all of them real — of the city. And yet, the writer might have placed a character in this real world and created a fictional story. So how do we decide that just this one character in the story makes the story fictional whereas the reality of the complete setting does not make the story real? In other words, how fictional should a piece of fiction be before it is called fiction? Or if we want to quantify it, we can ask how much fiction should a piece contain before it can be called fiction. And on the flip side, we can similarly ask how much reality should the real have before it is called real. In what follows, I will argue that we are much more sceptical and demand much more of the fictional than of the real. That is, *we want the fictional to satisfy more stringent demands in comparison to the real*. This conclusion is best illustrated by looking at how we resist calling a story (that might have a large component of description that is 'real') real and insist on dubbing it fictional, and at the same time call a narrative 'real' that involves the fictional but is about the real. The best example of the latter is the discourse of science. In other words, the standard responses to fiction betray double standards towards the fictional and the real.

Let me begin with a simple analysis of the relation between the fictional and the real. Consider a story set in Kolkata, a story that is faithful to the various descriptions of places, people and events in that city but with only one character, say the protagonist, who is a fictional character. Let us also assume, as is often the case, that the writer has drawn upon her 'real' experiences of people and city in the story. What makes this story a work of fiction? One obvious response is that the main character in the story is a work of fiction and thus the whole story is fictional. What is fictional here? It is not the 'objects' of the story, whether they be entities such as the real places, characters and so on. Perhaps the fictional resides in the relation between these real entities. That is, we can have Kolkata as a real city but the relationship between the city and the protagonist is what is perhaps fictional in this case. Thus, one element of the fictional is enough to make us call the whole story a fiction. There is an important lesson here: the fictional spreads and infects a discourse unlike the real. A drop of fiction is enough to spread through a narrative and make the whole narrative fictional. Whereas, on the other hand, a fistful of reality does not make a narrative

a real one. Why this interesting asymmetry? *Why this belief that fiction contaminates easily whereas the real cannot do so?* What is at stake in this common belief?

The belief about the 'infectious nature' of fiction reflects an ideological stance of literature itself. Literature appropriates and enhances the value of fiction and subjectivity just as much as science appropriates the idea of objectivity. Whether such appropriations are tenable or not, it seems to be the case that linking subjectivity and fictional with literature is as much an ideological stance as is linking objectivity with science. In other words, there is a self-consciousness in literature towards this process of the infection of the fictional as against the inoculation against the real, a self-conscious process that has been carefully cultivated by literary practitioners and critics. An advantage in taking this position is that the privileging of the fictional and the subjective in literature and arts actually negates attempts to regulate the artistic expression through constraints such as the real. While this, in a fundamental sense, is a good idea, it also means that literature ceases to acknowledge its debt to the real and to the realistic foundations of its fictions. The reverse story with regard to science illuminates this further: science ceases to acknowledge its debt to the fictional and the fictional foundations of the discourse of the real.

There is yet another consequence of this essential intertwining of the real and the fictional. The idea of knowledge itself is based on both the real and fictional. Any idea of knowledge rests upon a foundation of 'truth' and 'falsity'. If this is so, then the relation between literature and knowledge becomes more complex.

Perhaps we begin with the wrong question. Perhaps we should not begin by asking whether literature is related to knowledge but by asking how knowledge systems are essentially related to literature.

If we begin with this question, we can easily see how it illuminates the relation between literature and knowledge. I will state what I believe is the right answer to this question: there is no knowledge system, which does not possess elements of the literary or the fictional imagination. I will consider this claim with respect to two of the most influential knowledge systems, two which actually act as examples in our judgement of whether a body of beliefs or statements constitutes knowledge or not. They are the exemplars of what we would call as knowledge and yet

their relation to fiction is necessary. The two examples are that of science and mathematics.

The fictional in science and mathematics: how real should science be? There is much that is in the nature of the fictional in science and mathematics. The association of fiction with science may be more obvious and clearer to understand. This is because science is a discourse about the world and the world functions as the final arbiter of its claims. This is the way in which reality intrudes into the scientific discourse. However, its essential relation to the fictional imagination is obvious since its narratives about the world are only that — possible stories about the world out of which some might be accepted as the 'correct' one. The stories that are not accepted should then be exactly equivalent to that of fiction. Thus, the path to truth and reality is through the minefield of the unreal and science has to construct and use such minefields. This is what I meant when earlier I alluded to the inheritance of the fictional in the discourse of the real.

There are many illustrations of the fictional in science and mathematics. But, as discussed earlier, fictional may arise either in terms of the objects or in terms of relations. The characters or the objects in the narrative may be fictional in the sense that they do not really exist but function as if they do. This is the power of fiction in that a story can place an individual who is a construct of the writer's imagination in a world which faithfully mimics the reality of that world, such as the city of Kolkata. What is fictional in such a story is the fiction associated with the object of the story. It is fictional in the sense that there is 'really' no such person as depicted in the story. Our judgement of something as fiction always draws upon ideas of reality such as saying that there is no real person in the world that the character correctly embodies. So, the world of imagination is the world of non-reference. In illuminating the use of the fictional in science and mathematics, I will discuss four 'objects' which can be, depending on one's philosophical position, fictional and these four entities are essential to modern science.

Space and time are the foundational entities upon which modern science rests. Without believing in the existence of the entities called

space and time, it would have been impossible to construct science as we know it. The most basic description of motion begins with the idea of change foregrounded against a background of space and time. In various ways, science betrays an ontological commitment to these two entities. However, the 'existential' status of both these entities is not obvious. There have been both philosophical as well as scientific theories, which have questioned our belief in the existence of such entities. One influential philosophical position against the belief in the existence of space was offered by Leibniz, a view called the relational theory of space.⁷ In this view, this world consists of objects alone and the relationship between objects is what is called space. That is, we do not need to invoke an entity called space over and beyond that of the objects of the world. The example of a genealogical tree is used to illustrate the nature of this relation. A genealogical tree has real people as objects who are all related to each other in various ways. There is no real genealogical tree over and beyond the people who appear there. Space is like that — there is nothing called space but only objects and the relations between them. There are also more arguments for claiming that an entity such as space cannot exist. One of them has to do with the observation that space is not accessible to us through our senses — we cannot see, touch, hear, taste or smell space. So what guarantees our belief in the existence of space? Space could be a fiction, a fiction that is essential to the real discourse of science.

There is a related story about space, science and fiction. Newton believed in the existence of what he called absolute space. Such a characterisation of space was thought to be essential for a foundation of his laws of motion, particularly the First Law. Newton also believed that he had experimental support to prove the existence of absolute space.⁸ What is interesting to note is that it took over two hundred years to show that absolute space was a fiction yet in those years important developments in science took place even with this fictional entity as an important element of the scientific narrative. There are many other such examples, including the well known one of the existence of ether, which was finally showed to be non-existent. In other words, a large body of scientific knowledge was created even with the acceptance of entities, which were later recognised to be on par with fictional ones, such as absolute space and ether. What is important for our consideration

is this possibility of creating a wide body of accepted knowledge, which is in many ways based upon fictional entities.

Time is also possibly fictional, in the sense that there is a reasonable argument to show that the entity we call time does not really exist. While philosophical arguments for this are easily found, it is also interesting to note that even within scientific theories such a possibility can be found. I am referring to Godel who constructed a consistent solution to Einstein's equations of general relativity in which time did not have existence. This solution, called Godel's universe, implies that it is possible to have a consistent theory of the world without time as a 'real' entity. However, without belief in the existence of time, science as we know it would not be possible. Even the most basic analysis of movement and speed is based on beliefs about the existence of space and time.

Science actually abounds with such entities and relations, which are either fictional or shown to be fictional sooner or later. The question is how do such fictional or ephemeral entities create what we call knowledge and truth? While an elucidation of this question will take me too far from what I want to do here, it is enough to point out that perhaps no structure of knowledge can ever be removed from its indebtedness to fiction and the unreal.

Mathematics offers another set of interesting examples that challenge our naive view of fiction and its relation to knowledge. I will only discuss two simple examples with the added comment that these examples are nothing special but embody a process that is common to the discourse of mathematics. The first is the example of infinity. Infinity as a concept had been an integral part of all world philosophical traditions. However, the mathematical approach to infinity differed in a fundamental sense from the metaphysical idea of infinity.⁹ In the long history of this idea, we can see various approaches to the reality of infinity — while some held that infinity was 'real', at least in the sense of the reality of the divine, others believed that infinity was just a concept and could not have anything to do with reality. Debates on how finite human beings could ever grasp infinity were common in the philosophical traditions. However, in the nineteenth century the mathematician Cantor gave a new formulation of infinity. His theory of mathematical infinity engages in a profound sense with the question of

the reality of infinity. Cantor 'showed' that infinity was not actually a nebulous domain, something which did not distinguish between one infinite and another but was structured like numbers. The point is that while numbers like 1 and 2 can be distinguished there were no such 'numbers' related to infinity, which would in principle help us understand the structure of this domain. Cantor's formulation of the transfinite cardinals was exactly this: to exhibit a complex structure among transfinite numbers thereby allowing us to understand how one infinity can be 'greater' than another and so on. This exhibition of the structure of the domain of infinity actually adds a notion of reality to this domain and the language of the transfinite numbers constantly betrays a realistic commitment to them, at least in the sense of ontological commitment to mathematical entities in general. However, it is still quite conceivable that the idea of infinity continues to remain a vague idea in the human imagination and it can be argued that its fundamental force arises through its association with the fictional imagination.

This problem is similar to the important problem of mathematics in philosophy, that is, the question whether mathematical entities like numbers 'exist'. Given that the primal association with existence is the idea of the real, we can understand this concern as reflecting a broader one about the relation between mathematics and reality. While there are influential philosophers who believe that mathematical entities inhabit a platonic world (a world which is outside space and time!) there are others who believe that these are convenient fictional entities. Without entering into this debate, let me only make the comment that what is interesting in this debate is the possibility of fictional entities collaborating together to create the discipline of mathematics, a discipline which to us is a paradigm of knowledge and truth. While one may respond by saying that mathematical truths are not the truths of the world and hence the question of reality is indifferent to mathematics, we should note that this would be too hasty a conclusion. For, as is well known, the origin of modern science has been traced to the essential use of mathematics in the sciences. Famous scientists such as Galileo, Newton and Einstein have all voiced the belief that nature is written in the language of mathematics. Given that there is no modern science without this hovering presence of mathematics, we need to understand how knowledge about the real world is possible by using entities (characters

if you like) that in no conceivable sense are 'real'. In fact, fictionalism is an important theory in the philosophy of mathematics, a view that understands mathematical entities as fictional entities.¹⁰ Even with all the attendant problems of this view, the very fact that such a view is possible must make us wonder about the relation between the fictional and the real, between the imagined and the truth, between stories and knowledge.

A final knot in these puzzles is due to the theory-laden view, one much popular in philosophy of science. The basic argument here is that real observations are theory laden, dependent on the theory we hold. In other words, the theory we already hold structures the observations we make. This inherence of theory (and therefore language) in the world of real observations suggests that the world is at least partially constructed and constituted by our theories. This raises the question of what in science can really taken to be real.

Yet, science is able to continue its activities, make new truth claims about the world, without getting mired in worries that its foundations are filled with the elements of the fictional and the unreal. It is this pragmatic nonchalance that literature and art have to learn from science. Literature has to engage with the possibility that its world of fiction is actually constructed on the world of the real, on the world of valid knowledge. Having understood this it may go on its way, doing what it does with the same nonchalance of science!

The final point that is worth considering here is this: there is a profound relation between fiction and absence as well as between reality and absence. The theory laden view in a sense brings our attention to the relation between reality and language. There is a burden placed on language and this burden is not that of imagination but that of the constant, constraining presence of reality. However, language can escape this suffocating presence of reality only by escaping into the world of absence, a world that is objectively real. Perhaps the Nyāya school understood best the importance of the category of absence.¹¹

How is this relation between fiction and truth possible?

Such a relation is possible because it is do-able and has been done very effectively by science. This would be an adequate answer in itself but

it is worth exploring why such a relation should be surprising at all. One reason why it is often seen as surprising is basically because of a persistent belief, historically and culturally mediated, a belief that is part of the early Greek philosophical attempt to understand the nature of knowledge in a particular way. Since, for these philosophers, knowledge eventually is a judgement which would distinguish between belief on the one hand, and true belief that is justified on the other, the removal of the fictional from the domain of knowledge, may basically be re-read as a judgement on the fictional. The question then is what does fiction correspond to? Equivalently, what in our world or the logical world, can be mapped onto fiction?

Now, if we look at the presuppositions regarding knowledge in the western tradition with all its associated baggage, we see that the continuing battle is to keep the idea of the fictional out, meaning thereby to keep the human imagination out of the world of the real. Alas, the best paradigms of knowledge do not follow this dictate but happily build their houses of knowledge on fictional sand. Thus, it is not that the relation between fiction and reality, or between fiction and knowledge, which is such a serious problem. It is more the problem of misunderstanding the activity of knowledge-making, misinterpreting the role of language in knowledge creation, and the constant suspicion of the real that is *necessary* for creating a body of what we may call truth and knowledge. In other words, sticking to the world of the real will not get us far and the complexity of human knowledge, whether it be in the sciences or literature, is a just indicative of how engaging with the idea of the not-real, the unreal, the imaginary, is a necessary precondition for creating knowledge about the real!

I believe that a confused view about the relationship between fiction and knowledge is partly based on a confused view of what constitutes science or any knowledge-generating activity. But in misunderstanding science we have also misunderstood literature. However, the creation of their respective images is not due to 'external' factors alone; the members of these communities have shaped these images to suit their convenience. And the dominant image they have chosen to appropriate to themselves is that of objectivity to science and subjectivity to fiction. Both are false.

One way to further this debate is to begin with the relationship between science and language. Recollect what De Man's says: that it

is "not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language." When looking at how science views language, I am tempted to use the same characterisation for science! Science's engagement with the issues of language and the capacity of language to express and capture reality is very complex, and this complexity illustrates that science too is not a priori certain that its language games are a reliable source of information about anything but these language games. There is an easy counter to this, however. It is that science is interested in information that is about the real world and hence the articulations of language can always be checked with that of the real world. To claim this is to misunderstand the heart of scientific activity, which is nothing but a fertile attempt to proliferate narratives about the real world. What gets chosen, as the right one is quite immaterial to this activity of generating narratives. In fact, the more number of narratives that are created the greater the chance that there is a match between one of them and the world. To create these narratives, science has to radically question the role of language in its relation to knowledge and truth. It is this radical questioning of language that makes science essentially a multisemiotic activity. It privileges multisemioticity only because it is not sure, a la De Man, that its narrative can say anything more than its own language. Thus, the primary search for science is not truth or knowledge, it is only newer and newer languages, newer expressions in different 'languages'.¹²

Science's use of language captures an important insight: that language is the repository of knowledge and to know is actually to speak and write. But what is the knowledge that is encapsulated within language? Is it knowledge of language itself or more than that? To ask this question is to betray the belief that language in itself does not have the capacity to shelter reality within it. It is worthwhile to consider another view, namely, that language always constantly attempts to break the shackles of reality, shackles which influence the development of any language. Knowledge of language already gives us knowledge of reality. It is this worldview, which influences science's approach towards language. Science finds natural language, like English, incapable of capturing the reality of the universe. In order to find the hidden truths of the universe, science believes that all it has to do is to find the 'right' language. It believes mathematics is this right language but then a given

body of mathematics is not sufficient for this task. So mathematics itself continues to keep creating newer and newer sub-languages, all 'part' of mathematics.¹³ The statements of truth are to be found within this linguistic activity and not in experimental search. In other words, for science to find the hidden truths about the world we only have to find the truths hidden in both old and new languages. For science, to complete the text of the world, all we need to do is only 'complete' the language used in this text. Recall Heidegger :

"But when does language speak itself as language? Curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us... But when the issue is to put into language something which has never yet been spoken, then everything depends on whether language gives or withholds the appropriate word."¹⁴

To know something new is to find the right 'word' for it. New knowledge needs a new language or a variation of the old language to carry it. An essential belief of scientific theorising is that language has the capacity to yield the appropriate word; to find this word is the essential struggle of scientific theorising. Science moves to other languages when it finds that this appropriate word is not available in natural languages. It goes to one extreme and claims that any possibility of finding the appropriate word can be found only in mathematical language. Hence the oft-repeated exclamations of surprise at the 'unreasonable effectiveness' of mathematics, the mysterious matching of a mathematical 'word' to a physical concept and so on.¹⁵ What Heidegger wrote about poetry in its relation to language is what we should write about science.

Science follows this dictum in various other ways. The most obvious manifestation of this is in the structure of scientific texts and discourse. Scientific discourse is essentially multisemiotic; it uses many languages in order to expand the narrative possibilities since each language has an inherent limitation to its expressive capacity. One particular language cannot capture all that can be said about the world and hence to complete the description of the world it is useful to draw upon as many languages as possible. However, science has a specific belief about what kind of languages it needs to invoke. Given its suspicion of natural languages, it constructs technical languages. However, it can be argued

that a language like mathematics is not just a technical language but one which has a great deal of indebtedness to the world and the human imagination.¹⁶

In my view, the most importantly, science establishes discursive strategies which will, in principle, allow any practitioner of science to play a part in creating new narratives. Creating new ideas is not left to the vagaries of the human mind alone; to paraphrase a common saying, the task of being creative is too important to be left to the human mind. Science institutes discursive strategies of writing which allow any practitioner to be at least discursively creative.¹⁷

The importance of this discussion for understanding literature should be obvious. Fiction might want to construct itself as having nothing to do with reality or knowledge about some reality. But it can escape this responsibility to reality only as far as language can escape the dictates of reality; language often fails to do so.

Surprisingly, unlike science, fiction has a more guarded relationship with language. It is immersed in the 'moods' of language yet seems defensive about its use. It does not look at language through the 'free' eyes which science does. It does not give in to the dictates of language. Science gives in to language and creates a set of surplus narratives. It finally chooses one or some from this surplus by 'matching' these narratives with the world. Fiction is immersed in language but its privileging of human creativity comes in the way of its embracing language freely, of surrendering itself to the world of language. This is unlike science, where language is more important than the creativity of the human self who uses that language. *Perhaps this is the fundamental distinction between science and literature: what is most privileged in literature is the creative human mind whereas for science such a creative mind is always answerable either to the world or to the dictates of language.*

Imaginary and the real

An interesting insight into the nature of fiction and the essential significance it has for knowledge can be found in the use of imaginary numbers in science, which highlights how the language of fiction illuminates reality.

Imaginary numbers are those numbers, which are in general contrasted with 'real' numbers. They first arose in trying to find square roots of expressions whose squares were negative numbers. Since the square of any 'real' number has to be positive, whether the number was itself positive or negative, it meant that there could be no such 'real' numbers, which would satisfy the equation that a square of a number is equal to a negative number. However, the postulation of imaginary numbers meant that a number, i , was defined so as to have the property that its square is -1 . Given this number, we can construct a new set of numbers called complex numbers which are in general of the form $x + iy$, where x and y are real numbers and i is the imaginary number.

There are some very interesting properties of complex numbers, one of which is using them to describe the real world. There is an important sense in which numbers and the world share the appendage 'real'; real numbers have something to do with the expression of the reality of the world. And similarly for the imaginary number — an imaginary number by itself does not correspond to anything in the world. There is thus a naive but powerful association between the imaginariness of the imaginary number and a fictional world. In fact, the belief that imaginary numbers do not represent real things is such an enmeshed belief in the sciences that when quantum mechanics was first developed there was a serious problem in interpreting the wave function. The wave function was a purely imaginary term and thus could not really represent a physical entity. This simple correlation between two metaphorical images actually led to a new interpretation of what the wave function means. Also, no observable (therefore physical, real) quantity in quantum systems can be purely imaginary. Thus, the match between real numbers and the real world is not carried over for imaginary numbers. What is intriguing in this connection is the fact that real numbers are themselves not real in any sense of the physical reality of the world, yet we are able to make a distinction between real and imaginary numbers as far as their reference to the world is concerned!

Now, complex numbers, which are the combination of real and imaginary numbers, have become indispensable to the sciences. In fact, they not only make the mathematics of physics and other sciences easier but they also have an essential role to play. The use of complex numbers

makes explicit various physical properties. The development of quantum mechanics, as mentioned earlier, was entirely indebted to the use of such complex numbers.

What should intrigue us is that the *description of the real is accomplished through the invocation of real and imaginary numbers*. Such an invocation is based on a simplistic view that real numbers correspond to real properties whereas imaginary numbers are not so correlated. However, the description of the real needs an essential combination of the real and imaginary, in order to understand various properties of the real. It is only when we come to compare the world and the description of it that we look at the real part of the complex number and ignore the imaginary part.

What mathematics does, imagination does too. Our description of the real, whether in science or literature, essentially draws upon the ideas of the real and the imaginary. The world of imaginary, the real world for literature, shares this common space with the world of imaginary numbers. There is a simple lesson here: to talk about the real it is *necessary* to invoke the world of the imaginary, suggesting that if we begin with such binaries we are soon forced to acknowledge the mutual inclusiveness of the opposing terms.

I believe that this phenomenon of imaginary numbers leads to a profound insight about the nature of the real and imaginary. It is that the imaginary and the fictional are not contradictory or contrary to the real. The really real world is an intertwined mixture of the real and the imaginary and the fictional. It is only the case that the imaginary and the fictional are *absent* from the real world. Thus, to understand the real nature of the fictional is to understand it as absence, an absence that itself can be understood to be real, perhaps like Nyāya did. It is in this sense that the fictional is both real and not real. It is in this sense that literature is both knowledge and not knowledge. Unless we are able to better comprehend the nature of absence, a study which western thought has strongly resisted, we will continue to make the same mistakes about the relation between literature, reality and knowledge.

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Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay

INDIC PILGRIMAGE LITERATURE AS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: RAIDS AND RECONSTRUCTIONS

Broadly speaking, my wider project is to interrogate, through a rigorous rhetorical *reading* of texts, the ambiguities of what Deleuze and Guattari termed 'deterritorialization'¹ — a term co-opted by the Anglo-American radical chic after Negri and Hardt's *Empire*.² In its current, post-Marxist deployment, 'deterritorialization' is understood as a defining trait of modernity which is destructive of 'dwelling'. It also acts as a metonymy for what has often been called the modern or post-modern 'loss' of the referent. Perhaps this way of putting it makes it rather difficult to relate with the Indic literature on pilgrimage but I hope to make the linkages quite clear in course of elaboration of my problem.

As a Cultural Studies person, I would not ever have thought of engaging with the arcane *puranic* texts of *tirthamatmya*, had it not been for the fact that most studies on what they call 'spatiality' are usually prefaced by a ritualized lamentation about 'place', 'locality' and 'dwelling'.³ In these accounts of breast-beating, 'place' and 'locality' are held to be articulations of a primordial 'dwelling', postulated historically as 'lost' domains of 'authentic' experience.⁴ The classic account of this so-called 'loss' of dwelling — modernity as a state of metaphorical 'homelessness' — is contained in German Romantic thought. The narrative works by positing an epochal rupture — a 'then' when men 'dwelled' in the world without knowing it reflexively, without being aware of its contingency and a 'now' when men are conscious of the contingency of their worldings. Central to my concern here is the nostalgic slant of this account, summed up famously in an aphorism of Feuerbach in 1872: "In unknowing man was at home in his dwelling; in knowledge, he is estranged." By reversing the usual connection between knowledge, representation and certainty, this surprising sentence

stands at the crossroads of a historic disavowal of representation as such. In stating that unknowing fosters belonging, Feuerbach, crystallizing the Romantic critique of Enlightenment, argued not that knowledge has failed to produce, but that it has overproduced. As a result of this perverse excess, uncertainty has increased and the world is now covered with an inscrutable density of contingent representations. Hence, the yearning for what Blumenberg termed "the enclaves of unknowing": in the tradition of 'historical sociology' inaugurated by Tönnies' ideal of the closed, local, 'natural' *Gemeinschaft* of the medieval town as opposed to the open, global and constructed urban *Gesellschaft* of the modern world.

To give some recent examples, think of Anthony Giddens's concept of 'reflexivity' which works through the epochal disembedding of social relations from local, 'cosmological' contexts of close interaction and their reconstruction in modern, abstract and 'stretched' space-time matrices. The anthropologist Marc Augé defines modern 'non-place' as destructive of the ethnographic notion of place as *habitus* (defined by Bourdieu, with reference to Poincaré, as a "system of axes linked unalterably to our bodies and carried about with us wherever we go"). which constituted 'closed' universes of embedded meaning.⁵ Examples can be multiplied to show that what underlies this idea of embeddedness in 'dwelling' is a metaphysics of spatial belonging, in which, against the contingency and pluralism of the world, there is set the radically necessary and singular placement of the human body. 'Dwelling' and 'locality' are second-order spatial metaphors derived from the root metaphor of the supposed immediacy of the human body — embodiment. This organicism, characteristic of all nostalgic accounts of modernity, relies on a false and mystifying account of embodiment. It is crucial to remember that, "the notion of 'embodiment' has to do not with an empirical corporality but with the *imagined* boundaries of the self, and that the "human" refers less to an essence grounded in nature than to a *phantasmic* coherence projected onto a social order."⁶ Thus, the putative spatial immediacy of dwelling supposed to characterize 'past' or 'primitive' societies is ungroundable through the concept of 'embodiment'.

In assuming the reality of ethnological places as sites of a plenitude of meaning unmediated by representation, the nostalgic narrative of

'dwelling' crucially hinges on a myth of presence in which textual mediation is posited as if space was once, in some more immediate world, textless. My project of *deontologising* 'place' and 'dwelling' is informed by Appadurai's thinking about locality in the performative: far from being unproblematic and immediate *habitus*, locality is the figural effect of cultural-social *production*.⁷ The complicity of the disciplinary logic of anthropology, which fetishizes each society in its insular eachness, with colonialism and nationalism, has been brought out brilliantly by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson.⁸ 'Cultures' are not innocent ontological entities preexisting their normalisation through ethnology, and 'cultural difference' predicated on putative spatial autochthony is constituted and produced within a field of power relations. The enforced 'difference' of places becomes, then, part and parcel of a global system of domination. It is thus necessary to ask: who has the power to make places of spaces? What I wish to do through my reading of *puranic* texts is to unravel the foundational violence implicated in modern locality building.

To come back to pilgrimage. Although pilgrimage is a universal practice, at least in so far as the so-called world-religions are concerned, my study of pilgrimage texts shows that a great difference exists between our Sanskrit texts of *puran* as opposed to the hundreds of pilgrimage narratives written in the 'west' since the fourth century AD. With Judaism and Christianity, from the moment God said to Abraham, 'Leave your country,' this *displacement* has been understood as a descent into mundane time and history which intervened when the Israelites had lost *their* place. Subsequent to this loss of 'dwelling', instead of their place, the Hebrews had History and a promise to reinstate Place. Longing for the primordial place (be it Israel or Corbbray) and a certain de-emphasis on 'mundane' time ('*Les Temps Perdu*'), have remained one of the leitmotifs of Judeo-Christian thought. Towards the end of his life, Heidegger used to say that all his work was about the 'locality' of Being and, in this connection, perhaps it will not be improper to think of Heidegger's influential critique of the 'vulgar' concept of time and history as the iteration of a biblical motif. The western notion of 'sacred' place, at least since fourth century AD,⁹ merely reflects these preoccupations and the immense discursive investment on *the* promised land shows how central is place in the western episteme.

In other traditions and practices, however, displacement turns out to be more central: travel, for example, is not just a supplement to settled dwelling but much more. In the Islamic (Arab) literary tradition where travelogue emerged as a distinctive genre from the tenth century onwards, travel was clearly understood as a libidinal *expenditure*, as excess, scripted through the rhetoric of the marvelous (*ajā'ib*).¹⁰ Keeping these in mind, in the rest of this essay, I want to elaborate on the interrelated notions of location, spatiality and the idea of sacred place as found in our Puranic *tirthamahāmyas*.

As is well-known, in classical geography, there was a precise set of concepts — *topos*, *choros*, *geos* — delineating location on different scales.¹¹ Of these, the nearest to our 'place' is *topos* — which has close connections with the medieval and Renaissance 'art of memory'.¹² In strict analogy with that art, the topographic aims to describe and remember places by narrativizing them; which is to say, the process through which a memory-place (*topos*) is created and maintained, is just the way in which places are created. Thus, places *take place*, they are performed.¹³

What happens in Indic spatial ontology? Firstly, though there are a variety of words for place — *sīhan*, *sīhal*, *khestra*, *sīhali* — there is no exact word for space, understood as an inert container. At least in the *purāṇas*, which I have studied closely, I did not come across any word or even a concept that would correspond to Aristotle's recognition of space in *Physica*: "place is what contains that of which it is the place... [and] place can be left behind by the thing and is separable". Hence space.

This is not to say that we can find in Aristotle a reflexive understanding of space. Heidegger has written in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1959) that the Greeks had no proper understanding of space. Panofsky, writing about plastic space in antique art justly observed: "Aristotle ... with a basically quite unmathematical transfer of qualitative categories to the realm of the quantitative, attributed six dimensions (*diastaseis*, *diastēmata*) to *topos koinos* or general space (up and down, front and back, right and left), even though the individual bodies are sufficiently defined by three dimensions (height, width, depth). Moreover, Aristotle conceived this "general space" in turn as merely the furthest frontier of an absolutely large body, namely the

outermost celestial sphere — just as the specific location of individual things (*topos idios*) is for him the frontier where the One meets the Other."¹⁴ This is to say that the antique notion of space was embodied and tactile but, at the very least, we have there some analysis of spatiality, however limited and unsystematic (Panofsky noted that for the ancients, "the totality of the world always remained something radically discontinuous.") In Indic discourse, for reasons that requires illumination from specialists, time received a lot of attention while it is difficult to come across anything systematic at all on space.

In *Vāyupurāṇam*, for example, we have about 16 chapters (34–50) on the genesis of the universe, of which the first is devoted to the description of the earth consisting of seven *dwipas* (*Jambū*, *Plakṣa*, *Salmali*, *Kusa*, *Krauncha*, *Saka* and *Puskara*) surrounded respectively by seven oceans of salt water, sugarcane juice, wine, clarified butter, milk, curd and sweet water.¹⁵ Between 34 and 49, we have descriptions of the various parts of the world (including *Bharatavarsha*) and related phenomena, coming finally to chapter 50 entitled *Jyotiṣprachara* which describes the universe as consisting of the seven *rasātatas* inhabited by different kinds of beings. If the notion of space, understood as pure extension, even in void, did exist, it would come up here. To the question, what is there beyond the known universe, the *Vāyupurāṇam* says enigmatically: all that exists beyond this place is unreachable even by gods and sages, are invisible and devoid of *hyabāhara* (50: 55). The paradox is, at the very beginning of this chapter, the word 'infinite' (*ananta*) is evoked a few times. For example, in connection with the expanse of the universe, consisting of the five elements (*bhūtas*) the word *ananta* is mentioned (50:2). That the absence of *hyabāhara* in some realm can obviate the need for thinking about it analytically, shows the anthropomorphism inherent in the project itself.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that though the mathematical idea of zero is said to be an Indian contribution and geometry was well-developed, the concept of physical void does not seem to have surfaced. We have, in Brahminical as well as Buddhist texts, all kinds of abstract speculations about void as such, about its relation to plenitude and the absolute¹⁶ but when it comes to actual physical void, there seems to be an intrinsic inability to interrogate or even name it. This is symptomatic because the concept of void brings with it the idea of a

homogeneous and undifferentiated realm of pure extension – the idea of a pure realm of ‘containment’ of the sort that is arrived at, for instance, when one abstracts the thing from its enclosing surroundings so that what is left is nothing but an empty ‘space’. Space is not in place.

What about ‘place’? The modernist understanding of the problem of spatiality would insist that the pre-modern world was essentially a place-world, a world of ‘habitation’ and locality — ‘dwelling’ as they say. Heidegger wrote famously: Man *dwells* and does not just occur, like some mineral on the surface of earth. My project is to *deontologise* ‘place’ and ‘dwelling’ — I think these are historical *effects* rather than the ground of all history. Instead of thinking of place as the unproblematic site of plenitude of meaning, a metonymy of presence, I want to ask how texts *constitute* place and dwelling. Place, as I indicated earlier, is not out there. It *takes place*.

In keeping with this view, I suggest that contrary to the widely held vision of pilgrimage as an existential quest, as ‘liminoid’ and ‘anti-structural’,¹⁷ I want to read the figure of pilgrimage as structurally homologous to ‘modern’ tourism. In my pilgrimage-narratives, things are read as signs of themselves: the *tirtha* *qua* place is not experienced as given bits of the real but infused with a certain ideality scripted beforehand in the repertoire of inherited texts. Thus, and in strict analogy with tourism, *tirtha-mahatmya* texts were constituted not so much through the empirical act of seeing but through a necessary convergence of the pilgrim’s sight with the idea of that sight: the reality of *tirtha* is figural-textual rather than literal. The tradition of the *mahatmya* genre preferred testimony of the ear to that of the eye in keeping with dominant orality. Hearsay was authority, sight at best could confirm.

There is a sense in many theorizations of pre-modern ‘place’ that the former is concrete and immediate. My reading of *mahatmyas* decisively establishes that there is a marked tendency in these to abstract from concrete particularities of any given place.¹⁸ Take, for example, *Gayamahatmya*, found in the last seven (15-112) chapters of *Vayupuranam*. The references to concrete places in Gaya are few and these are almost casual. And the text itself is a very poor guide in locating these places in real Gaya. The reason why Gaya is a *tirtha* is that the petrified body of Gayasur lies here. Yet, there is no discussion of where exactly this *shila* lies though there is no dearth of landmarks

in Gaya (the river Phalgu, various hillocks etc.). All sacred places are described in relation to this *shila* but there is no clue as to how this *shila* itself is to be located. And the few references to concrete landmarks that are made are deliberately obscured by the juxtaposition of imaginary and invisible or perishable landmarks like the heavenly river *Baiturini*, the sacred Banyan tree which grows alongside the cave of *Gridhrakut*, tanks like *Rukminikunda* or *Swaraswikunda* etc. When in slokas 78 and 79 it is said that the sage Lomasha brought the rivers *Sharabati*, *Betrabati*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Saraswati*, *Kaberi*, *Sindhu*, *Sreshtha Chandana*, *Bashisthi*, *Saraju*, *Ganga*, *Jamuna*, *Gandaki*, *Indira*, *Mahabaitarini*, *Nidhara*, *Sarabi*, *Alokunda*, *Udichi*, *Kanaka*, *Koushiki* etc. to Gaya and these are still there in some unnamed *jalashyay*, we are left in no doubt that Gaya is not a concrete place at all, it is simply a relational term, a node in a network, which is *performed* rather than simply *is*. Whereas references to verifiable landmarks are almost absent or anachronistic, the exact rituals to be performed in each segment of the petrified body of Gayasur, are mentioned in great detail. There is a sense here that place is not out there on the ground, that place *takes place*, through ritual, through performance. In the sacred texts on Gaya, a central role is ascribed to the Gayali Brahmins, well-known for their greed and rapaciousness. In the absence of definite landmarks, so it seems, the rituals of these Gayali priests would *perform* the sacred places. One might recall, in this context, the early 19th century anecdotes of Vijayram Sen, the Bengali *pundit*, narrated in his *Tirthamaigal*, when he suspected that the Gayali priest had cheated him by not showing the genuine stone of Gayasur.

The truth of course is that there is no one genuine, singular stone of Gayasur though *mahatmyas* often and deceptively use the phrase “this very place”. One of the most recondite scholars of Hindu pilgrimage, Diana Eck, has shown, in the context of Benaras, the holiest of holy cities, that a Hindu sacred place

“is always set in the context of a wider peripheral vision in which *tirthas* and their *mahatmyas* are not unique, but ultimately numberless, limited not by the capacity of the divine to be present, but by the capacity of human beings to discover ... divine presence. The dissonance, of course, arises from a discourse of exclusivity and uniqueness ... typical of the monotheistic traditions of the west.”¹⁹

Which is to say, our *tirthas*, *dhamas* and *pithas* are not stand-alone, unique, singular places. On the contrary, the language of pilgrimage with its grammar of sanctification *creates* an imagined landscape out of a vast corpus of places and stories. To quote Eck again,

"singularity not the primary marker of ... [*tirtha*]'s significance; indeed, everything about *the* holy city is duplicated elsewhere, set against a pattern of symbolic signification that makes a *tirtha* not unique, but inextricable part of a wider landscape shaped by the duplication and repetition of its features. It is not the centre, but one of multiple centres in a polycentric landscape, linked with the tracks of pilgrimage."

So, in the minor genre called *stahlapurana*, we come across claims that this place is the Varanasi of South India or that place is the Varanasi of Eastern India.

Places are created and sanctified by humans, rather than the other way round as we find in Romantic or post-Romantic celebration of place (Wordsworth, Proust) as formative of persons' identity. Also, and tellingly, the kind of very specific descriptions of concrete sites we find in Christian pilgrimage narratives are characteristically absent in our *mahatmyas*. The Hindu *tirthas*, permit me to conclude, appear as points of contact between the curving planes of divine and human existence, as mere nodes in a network conceived as sacred geometry. The distinctive attributes of real places are replaced by sacred nodes and geography itself becomes an abstract cosmic geometry (see Fig. 1). Far from place and locality as grounds of being, as 'dwelling', the message of place uttered in our sacred texts, heard by millions of people over tens of centuries is that place is an illusion (*maya*), which being *there* is meant to dispel.²⁰

In the new localism of the Heideggerian kind (in his last public seminar in Le Thor held in 1969, he characterized the final stage of his own thinking as preoccupied with "the question of place, or of the locality of Being"), in this melancholic, fatalist vision tainted with postmodern pessimism one suspects, has deep roots in metropolitan touristic anxiety about the disappearance of the local, its mundane but worldly character which gives it a certain earthiness, as opposed to the metropolitan 'society of the spectacle' where, "All that once was

directly lived, has become mere representation."²¹ This investment on "bare life", so to speak, acts as a kind of counterpoint to postmodern visions of 'deterritorialisation': the disembedding of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their reconstruction (through media) in more abstract and more 'compressed' space-time matrices. In effect, these apocalyptic visions are mere variations on a basic theme which goes back to the nostalgic essentialism of 18th century metropolitan Romanticism (Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*) that affirms the reality of *the* origin by proclaiming its loss.

Is it possible to go beyond this cliché-ridden narrative of origin-loss-and-redemption? Nietzsche talked about the "morbid hedonism of the redeemer-type". Redemption is decadent. "We have never been modern", Bruno Latour wrote poignantly, meaning that the world has never confirmed to the model of a universal rupture: a fiction that conjures up an anteriority when life was a unity as opposed to a corrosive present when representation has split life into a lost 'real' and its phantasmic copies devoid of depth or meaning. An example from the quotidian lifeworld of the ordinary people in India brings home the point. In subaltern, popular maps sold in pilgrimage centres of India, meant ostensibly for the unlettered masses, one finds crude pictorial depictions of the myths superimposed on government survey maps (see Figure 2). People immediately recognize their gods and their dwellings in these maps. They do not find anything incongruous in what appears to us a promiscuous melange of worldings: the enchanted cosmology of the *puranas* as opposed to the administrative-governmental imperative of cartographic emplacement. In popular understanding, then, there was no rupture: the world is not double, it is many.

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Kunal Chattopadhyay

DIFFERENT FORMS OF TRUTH : VICTOR SERGE AND LEON TROTSKY ON THE FATE OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The Place of Victor Serge in History

When students of literature study writers who were critical of the Stalinist or post-Stalinist regime, they are more apt to pick up Solzhenitsyn or George Orwell, or even the one-time Cold War cult, *The God That Failed* — Victor Serge was and remains a limited circulation figure in even the west, to say nothing of India.. Yet Serge was there, as an active participant, whose literary activity, conceived of as two cycles, covered the rise and fall of revolutionary aspirations. Born the son of Narodnik revolutionaries, his uncle hanged for taking part in the conspiracy of Narodnaya Volya against Tsar Alexander II, a fate his parents escaped only by timely exit abroad. Victor Kibalchich was born in Belgium in 1890. As a young man in Paris, he worked as a typesetter, wrote poetry, and was close to the anarchist tradition. In his 20s, he participated, at least marginally, in "the Bonnot gang" — a group of bohemians who expressed their contempt for the bourgeoisie by robbing banks. This led to his imprisonment. Freed in 1917, he left for Spain and was present in Barcelona in early 1917, where he worked as a typographer, was a member of the CNT, a friend of Salvador Seguí (who was the inspiration for the character of Dario in *The Birth of our Power*), and a contributor to *Solidaridad Obrera* and *Tierra y Libertad* (in which he published his first article signed Victor Serge). In July 1917, he took part in the popular insurrection in Barcelona. This uprising failed. The same year, the Bolshevik-led October revolution caught his imagination, and he tried to go to Russia.

Arriving in Russia, he received a shock. 1919 was the worst year of the civil war, with soviet power fighting with its back to the wall. This had an impact on workers' democracy. But while Serge sympathised with his anarchist comrades, he became a Bolshevik, believing that they

were the only revolutionary party committed to a real overthrow of the capitalist system. Within Bolshevism, he was part of the left wing. This brought him personally and politically close to Leon Trotsky, a friendship that would outlast Stalinist counter-revolution, the imprisonment and exile of both, struggles to rebuild a revolutionary movement and attempting to come to grips with the nature of transformation of the Soviet Union. At times, what has been highlighted, especially by orthodox Trotskyists, is the difference between Serge and Trotsky

Trotsky argued, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, that the Soviet Union was a bureaucratically degenerated workers' state. By this, he meant that the democratic revolutionary soviet power and with it the direct political power of the working class had been extinguished by a newly hatched bureaucracy, which, however, he refused to identify as either a new, bureaucratic collectivist class, or a state capitalist class. Within the left opposition and similar left communist currents, these views were present. Bruno Rizzi, Victor Serge, Max Schachtman, and later on Tony Cliff, C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, would be among those rejecting Trotsky's position.

But this puts both revolutionaries in a false light. What united them was far more important than what divided them. Both were dissident Marxists in an age when Marxism was being canonised. This was an era when there were millions of people calling themselves communists, sincerely desiring to fight for the emancipation of the working class. Yet their loyalty to the Soviet Union and its current leadership made them keep silent about the crimes committed in the name of socialism. Equally, their uncritical acceptance of the political line emanating from Moscow made them accept organisational forms and politics at variance with the revolutionary-democratic traditions of classical Marxism including early Bolshevism, and also often to the detriment of the revolutionary struggles in their own countries. The Dissidents were those who continued to think for themselves. Not all came to identical conclusions, but collectively, they kept alive the critical and revolutionary spirit of Marxism. And before they, whether Trotsky or Serge, or anyone else, could say what they meant by Marxism, they had to settle their accounts with the Russian Revolution. For at that point in history, one could not state that one was a revolutionary Marxist before first of all explaining one's position about the Russian revolution.

Both Trotsky and Serge tried to look at all phases of the Russian revolution. Trotsky was to go back to the early period often enough, with at least three versions (with essential internal consistency, the differences being mainly based on the specific political struggles he was waging at different times). During the negotiations at Brest Litovsk, he wrote his first small pamphlet, *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*. During the inner party struggle in 1923-24, he wrote *The Lessons of October*, a book-length introduction to a volume of his writings. And finally, in exile, he wrote *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Trotsky's analysis of the rise and character of the bureaucracy permeated his writings of 1923-1940, with changes coming as he drew new conclusions. But among the most notable products were *The Third International After Lenin*, an assessment of the decline of the communist International as a revolutionary organisation, some of his writings on the rise of Hitler that dealt with the responsibility of Stalin and the Communist International, and of course his two major works – *The Revolution Betrayed* and the unfinished *Stalin*. As historian and political analyst, Trotsky laid down the basic pattern, and non-right wing, non-apologetic writings on both the making of the revolution and the rise of the bureaucracy have followed him to a considerable extent, without necessarily agreeing with all his conclusions.

Serge also wrote a series of important studies. His *Year One of the Russian Revolution* is at least as important as John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*. He also wrote a number of other books, including the 1937 book *Russia Twenty Years After*, which was a devastating expose of the Stalinist regime. But Serge turned to novels, repeatedly, as his chosen form of expression. The first novel cycle dealt with capitalist exploitation and the rise of working class power. These included *Men in Prison*, *The Birth of Our Power*, and *Conquered City*. Then came the novels questioning the evolution of official communism – if we omit the lost novel *La Tourmente*, dealing with the year 1920. The next cycle consisted of three novels – *Midnight in the Century*, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, and *The Long Dusk*.

Serge was a committed political activist, and most of those who have written about him have seen his novels simply as fictionalised history. Only a few, like Richard Greeman, have questioned this. It is quite true, that in 1928, Serge was arrested as a Trotskyist, and it was

only the scandal that the incident caused in Paris, among communist fellow travellers, that enabled him, unlike so many others, to be released. So it is true that he took up writing novels because other courses were closed. He could not serve the revolution within the party, because the party had been taken over by a caste of bureaucratic elements, who were consolidating their reactionary dictatorship over the working class.

But why literature? Why not direct oppositional action, like Trotsky? To answer this question one has to recognise that Serge did not use novels only as a substitute for politics. He was an artist with a clear conception of his mission, a substantial mastery over the literary forms he was using, and a unique position in the history of literature. Indeed, on this point it is necessary to differ sharply with Susan Weissman. Arguing that 'Serge's critique of Stalinism was the core of his life and work',¹ Weissman takes a rather short-sighted view of Serge the novelist. Repeatedly, she makes comments of this sort: 'Serge was first and foremost a political animal, and it was only when barred from political action that he turned to literary activity'.² 'Writing, for Serge, was something to do only when one was unable to fight.'

Perhaps among the most difficult passages to accept is the following one:

"Serge wrote with a mission: to expose and analyse the significance of the rise of Stalinism. He worked continuously until he died, churning out novels, histories, pamphlets and polemics. In the years 1928 to 1936, while still in the Soviet Union, Serge wrote four novels, two short stories, and six works of history, politics and literary theory; he translated novels and poems and seven volumes of history, politics, theory and memoirs. Considering the difficult circumstances under which Serge laboured, his prodigious output is extraordinary."³

What one wonders is whether Serge, who took literature seriously and considered himself 'in the line of the Russian novelists' (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Korolenko), would be flattered by this purely quantitative appraisal of his fiction. On the qualitative side, although Weissman does use the words 'poetic' and 'lyrical' here and there in praise of Serge's writing, her aesthetic criterion is extremely utilitarian. The most she has to say about *Midnight in the Century* is that it is 'useful' for its account of certain theoretical discussions among exiled Left Oppositionists.⁴ She points to Serge's 'ability to see social reality

clearly and honestly and write about it poetically' as if the poetry and the sociology were distinct, and Serge was "really" a political analyst dressing up analysis poetically, the poetry being mere frills.

Serge's own account of his decision to write novels recalls Luther's conversion after he was caught in the storm. Shortly after his release, he was struck down by severe pains in his stomach, and was delirious. In one lucid moment during this acute pain and delirium, he wrote,

"je pensai que j'avais énormément travaillé, lutté, appris sans produire rien de valable et de durable.... Si par hasard, me dis-je, je survivais, il faudra finir vite les livres commencés, écrire, écrire ... Je songerai à ce que j'écrirais, j'esquissais mentalement le plan d'un ensemble de romans-témoignages sur mon temps inoubliable ..."
[I reflected that I had worked, fought, and learned an enormous amount, without producing anything valid or lasting. I told myself, "If I manage to live, I must be quick and finish the books I have begun: I must write, write ..." I thought of what I would write, and mentally sketched the plan of a series of witness-novels about these unforgettable times."⁵

So the witness-novels were also the product of his discovery that he had managed to survive, and that it was necessary to do more than merely survive. This kind of a compulsion to bear witness led him to write about the grandeur and tragedy of the Russian revolution. He was also to be the only Soviet author of his generation who survived, and wrote about his own times without sweeping certain uncomfortable truths away from the eye of his reader. This was hardly conducive to earning his bread. Soviet writers and Western fellow travellers were going to be offered lucrative terms in the 1930s, but only if they conformed. In the case of Serge, he could barely earn a living by translating (for example, some of Lenin's works) and even then suffered the humiliation of not having his name mentioned as translator. As his old friend Ilya Ionov, the director of the state publishing house, explained to him when Victor's first novel, already translated and set in type, was banned:

"Vous pouvez produire un chef-d'oeuvre par an, mais tant que vous ne serez pas rentré dans la ligne du parti, pas un ligne de vous ne verra le jour"

[You can produce an annual masterpiece, but as long as you are not back in the party line, not a line of yours will see the light.]⁶

We therefore need to situate Serge no less than Trotsky in his full context. Trotsky had given up a possible career in mathematics, not joined University, in order to become a professional revolutionary. While he was a very cultured man, who wrote a fairly serious book called *Literature and Revolution*, and possibly the greatest history of the Russian revolution written till now, he was primarily interested in political activism. When Trotsky wrote on novels, he directed attention towards class conflict, revolutionary strategy, and so on. This is not to suggest that he took a narrowly reductionist approach. In fact, when the "proletkult" tried to impose a class-reductionist orthodoxy, he fought them with considerable vigour. But Serge was something much more than all this. He had close links with both French and Russian literature well before he turned to writing novels. As a young man in Paris, he had translated Russian modernists into French. In Russia, he was closely associated with the literary milieu, and had his own position on the debate over proletarian culture.

That Serge could write at a moment when authors were committing suicide, being arrested and censored, was because he wrote in French and was published in France. Between 1929 and 1932, he managed to send off five manuscripts to Paris, including *Year One of the Revolution*, a second work subtitled "Literature and Revolution" (dealing with the subject indicated by the subtitle), and the first three of his novels. As Greeman argues, an individual capable of producing so much serious work in such a short period was not an "accidental novelist", but a disciplined and dedicated artist.⁷ If so, we need to reconsider Serge's position in literature as a preliminary to examining the way Serge and Trotsky looked at the truth.

Serge's memoirs as well as articles in the French magazine *Clarté* show discussions about Alexander Blok, Andrei Biely, Sergei Yesenin, Ossip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Mayakovsky among the poets, as well as novelists like Alexei Tolstoy, Babel, Evgenii Zamiatin, Konstantin Fedin, and of course his close friend, Boris Pilnyak. His writings from the 1920s to the 1930s reveal to us the assimilation of so much talent to the revolution, and then, the brutality with which this talent was destroyed.

In 1932, when his *Literature and Revolution* was published, it was a last-ditch defence of revolutionary humanism against the despotic

party-state control over literature that was to pass off as Socialist Realism. In this work, Serge sought to defend the values of spontaneity, sincerity, experimentation, artistic quality and the writer's independence from dogma in the name of real, popular-democratic socialism and the social needs of the transitional epoch. In a 1925 essay, he agreed with Trotsky, that while the bourgeoisie had developed its culture over the entire period of transition from feudalism to capitalism, even before seizing power, the relatively rapid development of the proletarian revolution to the abolition of classes would preclude a proletarian culture properly speaking. But then he qualified this agreement by arguing that Trotsky had foreshortened the period of transition to a classless society too much. Serge argued that the transition could take place over several generations. So the revolutionary proletariat would need its own culture, which could not be restricted to the label revolutionary culture. At the same time, like Trotsky, he understood that without belittling the achievements of the worker-novelists or worker-poets, to create the kind of epic of a new era that he was calling for, there was the need to preserve and deepen links with the culture of the past. It was in this role that he visualised himself after his rebirth or conversion of 1928.

But what form was his writing to take? Already in the early to mid-20s, he had been arguing that the classical novel was no fit form for expressing the complex pulsation of life in revolutionary Russia, or indeed in the revolutionary epoch as a whole. Writing in *Clarté*, he said that in his view it was impossible to portray the Russian revolution in the pace and style of Balzac describing the sordid and monotonous life of father Grandet ["Il ne me semble pas qu'on puisse dépeindre la révolution russe avec le style et l'allure d'un Balzac décrivant la vie sordide et monotone du père Grandet..."].⁸

Serge was influenced by a number of authors when he developed his own style. He wanted to express the discontinuities of life of not just individuals but large collectives. To do this, he adopted the style of Boris Pilnyak. His praise of Pilnyak's *Naked Year* stressed the absence of a central plot, central characters, the collision of events, of characters crowding on each other, and dynamism in the narrative. One has to read his own *Conquered City* to get a feel of the same style. Yet Serge shared with Trotsky a criticism of Pilnyak. In *Literature and Revolution*

(Trotsky's book), Trotsky had argued that Pilnyak's novels lacked an understanding of the historical meaning of the revolution. Serge voiced similar criticisms, and seemed to be attempting to rectify that from a Marxist perspective in his novels of the revolution.

It is also worth remembering that Serge had lived in Vienna for a few years, and had studied Freud and Adler. He was close to Lukacs and Gramsci, and appreciated Joyce and Proust. This was hardly the person who can be captured within the concept of a relatively simple-minded *partiinost*, let alone succumb to the Zhdanovist dictatorship over culture that engulfed the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s. So on the one hand we have Serge the communist, who fought to bring about the realization of his vision until he was expelled from the Party and arrested as an Oppositionist in 1928. It is true, chronologically, that he became a novelist only after it was no longer possible to pursue his goals through direct political activity. On the other hand, or perhaps, better to say, simultaneously and without contradicting the foregoing, we have Serge the artist, so deeply integrated with the proletarian experience and so committed to the truth of his experience, that he never had to be a propagandist, because the ideas were flowing from his being. His survival, as a human being and an artist, was a unique exception to the terrifying evolution of the 1930s. He was the last of the Left Oppositionists to escape from the Stalinist terror, as well as the last of the great generation of Soviet writers.

Serge was very different from a number of others with whom he is bracketed. He did not become an official friend of the Soviet Union when it brought trips to Moscow, lucrative royalties, and lionization by a conformist left back home in Western countries. By contrast, Serge lived in hunger most of his life. He died almost literally of starvation.

This might seem banal in a world where hunger stalks so many, were it not for the fact that this material condition cannot be excluded from our discussions of Serge as a novelist. In *Literature and Revolution*, he argued that the French novels of the day were written for an upper and middle class audience that did not want to be reminded of a world where hunger existed and shaped the lives of people. The fact that few writers earned enough by writing alone led them to jobs binding them even closer to the ruling class and its hangers on. Even many communist or other leftwing writers of Serge's generation were expiating guilt, like

George Orwell or Arthur Koestler.⁹ Serge did not have to try to empathize with the proletariat from outside, nor try to expiate guilt, for he was a proletariat who became a communist, not an intellectual from the upper classes trying to become both. To round off our discussion on Serge's place, we need to contrast him with the others with whom he has often been bracketed, like Koestler. Unlike the ex-communists who joined the bandwagon of the capitalist world, Serge remained committed to the revolution. He lived, as we saw, as a proof-reader, often for journals which were refusing to publish anything he wrote.

The rising curve

Reading Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, there is a sense of the tremendous social forces welling up from below, organizing, and forcing their way forward to make the revolution. Holding the relationship between the revolutionary masses and the leaderships in fine balance, Trotsky takes up the theme of popular participation and defines revolution thus:

"The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events. In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business — kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order become no longer endurable to the masses, the break over the barriers excluding them form the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial ground work for a new regime.... The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny."¹⁰

Throughout the three volumes of the *History*, Trotsky showed the complex interweaving of the class, the conscious, leading elements of the class, and the party and especially its leadership. On the one hand, he showed that without the enormous reservoir of creative, popular energy that was constantly pressing itself upon the part, there could have been no successful rearming of the party [by rearming the party, Trotsky refers to the radical change in line Lenin brought about, from fighting for a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry", i.e.,

workers learnt more about revolution by participating in the revolution, rather than by meditating about it.

But it is in *Conquered City* that he shows the tragedy of the Russian revolution. This is no two dimensional socialist realism. When one reads the novels about the revolution and the civil war by authors writing under increasing Stalinist pressure to conform, such as Konstantin Fedin's *No Ordinary Summer*¹¹ or Alexei Tolstoy's *Ordeal* or *The Road to Calvary*,¹² history is distorted beyond recognition, and a storyline emerges, of heroic workers who carry out the will of the perfect party leadership. The villains are perfectly villainous. *Conquered City* takes up the story of the Russian revolution where *The Birth of Our Power* had stopped. It describes the defence of Petrograd against the Whites. This book does not have any autobiographical element. It is a masterpiece in the way it describes atmosphere and events, for Serge does without a central character and builds the book through small sketches which grow into a broad and yet finely detailed mosaic. But this is no propaganda epic of proletarian nobility. A lesser writer constructing a sterile two dimensional tableau would ignore or be blind to the subtle and glaring contrasts which Serge portrays with his relentless honesty. He is not blinded by lofty talk of revolutionary heroism for he has experienced and records for us the betrayals, the squalor, the hunger, the pettiness, the jealousies, and the selfishness which formed the sombre and menacing backdrop to the bravery and idealism. His description includes showing how even within the grandeur of these early days, necessary steps turn into the emergence of special political power and special privileges. For Serge, the rise of the Cheka was a problem of major dimensions, even though he would side with many specific steps taken to combat perceived counter revolution. There is not yet a sharp breach between class and party, but questions are being asked by men and women who distrusted the setting up of new masters over them. But Serge's novel would not excite the anarchist too much, for against the emerging bureaucrats he pits the worker Bolsheviks, symbolized by Ryzik.

Though there is no central character in his novels, the figure of Ryzik winds its way through many of them. He is the defiant old Bolshevik who stands out at the end of *Conquered City*. He is among those sentenced to the isolators in *Midnight in the Century*. In this novel,

a radical bourgeois revolution, to the proletarian revolution.]. On the other hand, he also showed that without the distillation of mass experience and the laying down of a strategic path by the party, the mass movement could not have won.

Here, we encounter in flesh and blood the relatively abstract statement of *The Lessons of October*. The Old Bolsheviks were cadres devoted to the revolution. The party itself was a truly revolutionary party. From the beginning it acted like one. Yet, human thought being conservative, organisational stability itself being predicated on a certain degree of conservatism, the party leadership was disoriented. The slogan of a revolutionary democratic dictatorship was not discarded. And so in April there came about a historic clash between Lenin and the general staff of the party. Against the Old Bolsheviks, Lenin found support in the rank of worker Bolsheviks, tempered, but more fresh, more closely united with the masses. And that was what made October a reality.

Serge tackles both dimensions, but in somewhat different ways. *The Birth of Our Power*, starts with an optimistic view of Anarchist strength (mirroring reality) in Barcelona towards the end of the First World War. Powerful hopes grow with the news from Russia and they believe that Europe can be set alight at both ends. But then Serge's realism becomes as strong as his idealism when he starts to see that they are doomed without organisation as the rising approaches. There is a superb description of a bullfight as the tension grows with the rich sitting in the shade uneasily watching the workers sweating in the sun on the far side. Self-confidence is apparent in their manner for they are certain of the coming of "the worker's Messiah — the Revolution". But without careful planning and by relying on opportunist bourgeois politicians the revolt hardly gets off the ground. Soon afterwards, Serge says farewell to his comrades including Dario who is based on Salvador Segui, and sets off for Russia via France. There he is interned and the camp is an uncontrived reflection of contemporary society with the entrepreneurs and their victims, both nominally free and yet surrounded by wire fences and armed guards. This was certainly the reflection of the later Serge, for the weakness of anarchism, its opposition to the development of a class-based revolutionary party, was the flaw that crippled it both in 1917 and in 1936. The myth of the all-powerful party was also tackled by Serge, by showing the role of the proletariat, and by arguing that the

changed. In 1921, it had about 50,000 people, about half military.¹⁵ In 1917, the garrison had been relatively highly proletarian in composition. By 1920-21, this had changed. A large part of the garrison, including the 16th Rifle Regiment, as well as new recruits to the Baltic Fleet, were peasants.¹⁶ The impact of peasant disturbances on the sailors is quite evident. Stepan Petrichenko, the leader of the rising, was a peasant who had returned to his native Ukraine between April and the autumn of 1920. He found that "when we returned home our parents asked us why we fought for the oppressors. That set us thinking."¹⁷ At the beginning Serge intervened personally, attempting to mediate the conflict between the government and the rebels (rather daring for a disciplined party member in the middle of a civil war). He criticised the brutal way the regime handled the affair: refusing to negotiate or listen to the sailors' quite justifiable demands and slandering them as 'counter-revolutionaries' commanded by a White general. In the end, however, with enemy battleships poised as the ice melted and with the island fortress of Kronstadt no longer defending Petrograd from the Whites, Serge reluctantly sided with the Communists in repressing the rebels, believing that the country was too exhausted to begin a 'third' revolution.¹⁸

The decline of the Revolution and Stalinism:

Serge dedicated *Midnight in the Century* to "the memory of Kurt Landau, Andrés Nin, Erwin Wolf, who disappeared in Barcelona and whose very death was stolen from us." The dedication has a relationship with the book as a whole. This volume dealt with a smaller group of people – the revolutionaries who, despite Stalinist terror, had not broken. Shortly after the publication of *Conquered City*, Serge was arrested and deported to Orenburg, on the Ural River, where, because of his unbending attitude of opposition, he was denied work and nearly starved to death. In Orenburg, Serge was thrown together with a group of exiled Trotskyists and other oppositionists whose courageous struggle to maintain their socialist ideals in the face of Stalinist lies and persecutions later inspired what is perhaps Serge's most poignant and moving novel.

However, after his expulsion from the USSR, as we saw, he first wrote a series of non-fiction pieces. It was then, having fulfilled his immediate political duty by exposing Stalin's betrayal of socialism in

he is among the few who hold out, as indeed some did.¹³ In *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, when a new Moscow Trial is being plotted, he realizes that if he allows himself to be put on trial, it would be a victory for the bureaucracy, since many people would confess to whatever they were asked to confess. And so, he commits suicide, not out of personal despair, but as the only political act still open to him as a revolutionary.

Following *Conquered City*, there is the lost novel already mentioned. With this the first cycle, were the proletarian revolution is victorious only to meet tragedy in the form of isolation and bureaucratisation, comes to an end. These were written while Serge was eking out a precarious living in the USSR. The second cycle, written in exile, left him free to write as he chose. In *Conquered City*, Serge adopts a simple form of Aesopian language. He tells the truth about the early years, the heroism of the revolution, bringing out thereby the difference with the later years without mentioning them. At the same time, he tells the story like a good story teller. This is not the kind of purely propagandistic-didactic novel that Alexandra Kollontai would write.¹⁴

Serge had a conception of double duty of the revolutionary. He expressed the idea in print only in 'Literature and Revolution', but the idea informs many of his writings and deeds. He saw the militant's 'double duty' as being the duty to defend the revolution from *both* its external enemies (the counter-revolutionaries) and its inner enemies (intolerance and bureaucracy). When he arrived in Russia, civil war had started. He saw no other organisation than the Communists effectively defending the working class state. Since he had come to Russia to defend it, he decided to join them, hoping he could also successfully fight all potential authoritarian tendencies. He defended the Red Terror with rifle and pen. At the same time, he was interceding with Gorky, with Lenin through Gorky, and with Zinoviev, on behalf of anarchists. Susan Weissmann's work shows how closely he was connected to revolutionary syndicalists like Rosmer, Nin and Maurin, later Surrealists like Rosenthal and Naville who were at the core of the anti-Stalinist left in the 1920s and 1930s.

Serge's attitude towards the Kronstadt revolt a typical example of his sense of 'double duty'. The Kronstadt uprising came as the culmination of popular opposition to the regime. Between 1917 and 1920, the composition and political complexion of the Kronstadt garrison had

these non-fiction works, that Serge again felt free to turn to fiction in order to recreate the full human dimension of this experience in *Midnight in the Century*, which was published by Grasset in Paris in 1939 and mentioned for that year's Prix Goncourt. *Midnight in the Century* is a book about the twentieth century's darkest hour, when Hitler had smashed oppositions in Germany to establish the Nazi totalitarian state, while Stalin had transformed the Russian revolution into a counter-revolution. It is a book about revolutionaries facing defeat, revolutionaries whose fidelity to the ideals of 1917 landed them in the Gulag, and who had to ask and answer the question, what is to be done now?

This was of course an unexpected and difficult situation. Even Trotsky, in 1939-40, was forced to confront this question. During the debate in the US Socialist Workers' Party over the class nature of the USSR, he argued that if his opponents were indeed correct, and the Stalinist bureaucracy was not just a parasitic bureaucracy but a new ruling class, "nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist program ... ended as Utopia."¹⁹ Even in such a case, he was to place himself, not with the rising star of bureaucratic collectivism but with the working class: "It is self-evident that a new 'minimum' program would be required — for the defence of the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society."²⁰ Like Trotsky, Serge placed himself unhesitatingly with the oppressed. But he was also able to see the diversities within those who resisted. It is also a book radiant with admiration of the courage, political integrity, and humanity of its Communist heroes, glowing with intellectual passion as it grapples with the essential questions of socialism, history and human destiny, at a time when thought itself is "glacial... like a midnight sun on the skull." Radiant, too, in its revolutionary faith in an unknown future dimly viewed across an abyss of all-too-foreseeable cataclysms, a future symbolized by the image of seeds germinating in the earth. Finally, it is an important book, for the main issue that Serge deals with — socialism *versus* barbarism — is more than ever fundamental to mankind's survival. The collapse of Stalinism has not meant humanising of capitalism. Rather, freed of this pressure, US imperialism has shown how barbaric it could be. Serge's genius lies in his ability to dramatize with clarity the problems that have been besetting revolutionaries for 50 years in a style that is moving and poetic. Through the anguish of his heroes,

we are made to relive the dilemma of the first successful workers' revolution in the throes of transformation into its own opposite — from the activity of millions struggling to create a new world in the image of justice into a narrow, exploitative tyranny — and to pose the question anew for our own age. Serge's treatment of the motifs of life and its renewal, the passage of seasons and generations, and the connections maintained with great difficulty by imprisoned and persecuted revolutionaries among themselves, turns the theme of the survival of the socialist ideal under virtually impossible odds to the height of a poetic vision.

It is surprising, that Trotsky, who was of Jewish origin, and Serge, the atheistic son of agnostic or atheistic revolutionaries, both turned to dissident Christians as their forerunners. Trotsky talked about the Old Believer Arch-Priest Avakkum, hunted by the Patriarch Nikon, when looking at his own hunted existence. Serge brings up the theme of heresy and persecution as a lasting element in history in *Midnight in the Century*. It broods over Chernoe (Black Waters), Serge's fictional town on the steppe, which has hosted generations of exiles, refugees, sectarians and heretics. The town, we are told, was founded by a semi-legendary patriarch, Seraphim Lackland, a Seventeenth Century religious schismatic who led his people into the wilderness to escape the unholy power of the centralizing orthodox hierarchy only to be dragged back to Moscow and a martyr's fate. The image of the righteous, unrepentant old man chained in his dungeon, repeating, "Lord, I will never deny thee, I will never deny thy people," and telling the new Patriarch, when asked to repent, "Repent, yourself, or be silent, shameless servant of the Evil One!"²¹ reverberate through the entire novel.

Next in Serge's line of apostolic succession is Lebedkin, the political deportee from Petersburg. Exiled under the Tsarist regime, he welcomes the cleansing hurricane of the 1917 revolution in Chernoe — 1,000 miles from the capital — and contemplates his lonely fate on the same hilltop where Seraphim had earlier mediated his martyrdom. Seventeen years pass and Chernoe is again populated by deportees, martyrs and schismatics. Although the foreground of Serge's novel is occupied by the Left Oppositionists, the heretics of the new Stalinist orthodoxy, the background is crowded with persecuted schismatics — religious sectarians, Old Believers, Zionists — who are also suffering

for their faith. In the novel's climactic scene, Rodion's break from jail, there is a translucent moment of silent communion between the young Trotskyist and an old Believer which epitomizes the theme of eternal heresy and eternal persecution in the tortured Russian land. This epiphany, for which Serge has carefully prepared, takes place under streaming stars in a Biblical atmosphere that is a lifelong revolutionary materialist's tribute to the power of spirituality.

The Chernoe section of the novel opens with a powerful presentation of the coming of spring in the frozen lands of north Russia. The break-up of the ice on the river is greeted with joy by the villagers. Even the Trotskyist exiles, though they are mostly urban revolutionaries from a different setting, feel the change. The Old Bolshevik Ryzhik, one of the two leaders of the small group of Trotskyist deportees, celebrates the spring in poetic terms, despite the sarcastic comments of his comrade, Elkin.

The joy of nature's renewal is more deeply undercut by the irony of the political situation: "Springtime means sowing time, and sowing time means repression." The logic of events demands that in order to squeeze a grain surplus out of the sullenly resisting, newly collectivized peasantry, Stalin will take a new political tack, necessitating a new purge. The political exiles understand this process as a sign of the weakness of the regime. They have predicted it. The villagers, for their part, have been beaten down over the years since Stalin's great transformation of the late 1920s, and accept the onslaught in a resigned manner. But with Spring, hope also returns to the human breast, both villagers under compulsion and the left oppositionists.

The core part of the novel unfolds in the brief period between the coming of Spring and the imposition of a political new clamp down. During this interval there is time to take stock of lives, to choose how they will resist the coming blows, to exchange significant messages, to fall in love, and to pass the living flame of revolution from one generation to the next. It is significant, that Rodion in *Midnight in the Century* and Kostia in *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* both manage to escape. Nature's patterns of life and death, continuity in the destruction, are reflected in human patterns as well. In the theme of the human forces who will transmit the struggle against oppression from one generation to the next.

Serge believed that the Russian Revolution was not dead but only sleeping. Like Trotsky, even when the latter was writing *The Revolution Betrayed*, Serge could not shake off the belief that the greatest achievement of the working class could not be totally annihilated by the usurping bureaucracy. He felt that as industry developed and Russia emerged from backwardness, the socialized system of production would inevitably come into contradiction with the oppressive system of bureaucratic privilege and control. A new proletariat, self-confident and schooled in this new industry, would then pick up the struggle where the vanguard of the 20's and 30's had been isolated and defeated. This, however, might take generations (especially if war intervened, which it did) and until then the germ of revolutionary thought would be kept alive by minorities. It would be later, as we shall see in discussing Tulayev, that he came to recognise how total had been the rupture with the revolutionary past. In *Midnight*, Serge found a metaphoric expression for his vision in the related natural images of the Spring thaw and of seeds germinating beneath the soil and in the traditional Russian theme of "fathers" and "sons." At the same time, given his perspective of a longer duration for the Stalinist rule, it is surprising that even he did not see its consequences. Trotsky believed that the bureaucracy was likely to be defeated if war broke out. These were sometimes rash comments, but comments that a revolutionary trying to build a new revolutionary movement has to make. Nobody can build a mass revolutionary current or even a small current, while promising nothing but defeats. Serge's novels show him more aware than Trotsky on this point. *Midnight in the Century* appears so terrible, one could argue even more terrible than *Tulayev*, because it shows revolutionaries caught in a pitiless situation, with nowhere to go. Where could they go? The oppositionist who had recanted, even if under intense pressure of a kind communists outside a workers state are unlikely to understand, found that she or he had nowhere to turn. The Stalinist machine distrusted her or him, and at the same time, knowing that a person who had cracked once would crack again, used such people callously. They were interrogated under humiliating conditions. At the same time, appeals were made to their conscience as party members, to confess in the interest of saving the party. When Rodion, young and unskilled in the techniques of the underground, talks to one such person, Elkin and Ryzhik tell him

that he has done enough harm, for this man will tell it all to the secret police at some stage. The OGPU know that too. If the weaker ones did not exist, an OGPU official says, the strong would escape. For Serge is writing about early 1934, when the old Stalinists were making their last stand. They had triumphed as a faction, but they did not think of Stalin as a god. They had smashed the opposition politically, but did not want to annihilate it physically. Led by people who have been called Stalinist moderates, they insisted on legality, on following the proper procedures if someone was arrested and tried. So there had to be signed confessions as well as reasonably believable cases. For example there had to be a real breakdown before someone was accused of sabotage. All these came into play in the novel. A concrete, scientifically-grounded political perspective thus develops as a structuring element.

As late as 1933, even when Trotsky had written off the Communist International as a revolutionary organisation after the capitulation before Hitler,²² he was not willing to extend the same criticism fully to the CPSU. It would be 1935 before he moved to offer a cautious self-criticism in the essay 'The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism'. And it would only be in 1937, with *The Revolution Betrayed*, that his analysis of Stalinism as a very peculiar form of counter-revolution be completed.

This does not mean that the old guard were all wrong and the fresh revolutionary blood was fully capable of replacing them. But every generation comes to its understanding in its own way. For Rodion, for Kostia in *Tulayev*, the sense that the Stalinist bureaucracy was counter-revolutionary was to come along with a price — a loss of the great heritage of classical Marxism. Serge portrays this in two ways. In *Midnight*, we see this through Rodion. As he wanders the night streets of Chernoe, troubled and alone, his intuition becomes a certainty. The sight of GPU headquarters, lights blazing into the night, inspires him with a vision of that new revolution as an inevitable Spring tide. He is oppositionist enough to hope for a revolution, to even think of it as inevitable. But he has no conception, really, of how that is going to come about.

Rodion's escape into the starry night across the silent forest and the icy river is a symbolic flight into nature as well as a return to life, to the common destiny of the masses, who are part of nature and part

of history. If Stalinist totalitarianism represents the negation of the revolution, then the masses represent what Hegel called "the negation of the negation." Rodion, the least educated of the novel's heroes, is also the most philosophical, quoting Hegel and saying that a revolution needs to be made because the machine will not crumble by itself. His experiences in the forest include rites of passage such as a symbolic death by drowning and rebirth. He rejects the life of the solitary hunter who rescues him, outside society. But his return to society as a nameless worker sees him engaged in building an office for the GPU. It is Serge's ironic symbol for the paradox of "socialist construction" under the Stalinist system where the labour of the proletariat can only serve to increase the power of those who oppress it — until the time when the proletariat is ready once again to rise and fight for its emancipation.

In *Tulayev*, Kostia realises the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism, but sees no possibility of political struggle. His assassination of Tulayev is a solitary and a spur-of-the-moment act. He then leaves the capital and turns up in a Kolkhoz. The younger generation, in Serge's vision, contributes even by simply surviving. But for the older generations, no such possibility existed.

The Rodions, and their descendants survived, in the USSR, and even more, in East Europe. Christopher Hill's essay, 'From Lollards to Levellers', traced the continuity of the radical underground, and traced it forward again, through symbols like the rise of the Leveller Sea Green time and again. The messages could be of different types. It is evident that for the present age, Serge's novel itself is a kind of message. Serge himself, dedicating the book to his comrades in Spain, speaks of it as messages from their brothers in Russia. Like the messages transmitted from prison to prison within the novel, the book is first of all a kind of report, of the economic and political situation and an account of the physical, moral and intellectual health of the surviving Left Oppositionists, including its hesitations and internal factional divisions. It is also the message to the world of the comrades Serge left behind in Russia. Serge was haunted by the memory of the dead comrades behind him, and his novel was an effort to repay that debt as well as to create for them the immortality that he felt such revolutionaries, the collective revolutionary hero, deserved.

The Last Bolsheviks:

Serge shows the last Bolsheviks twice. In *Midnight in the Century*, dedicated to Trotskyists and dissident Trotskyists, Serge focuses exclusively on the Left Opposition. Even in the tundra and the steppes, they are discussing political theory, analysing Stalinism, taking sides in debates over whether it is state capitalism, bureaucratic collectivism, or Red Bonapartism. Issues of *Byulleten Oppozitsii*²³ are still smuggled in, at great risk. They are memorised and their ideas passed on from jail to jail, from isolator to isolator. Small groups meet and discuss strategy. When Elkin and Ryzhik are arrested and briefly put in the same ward, Ryzhik, as the senior in the party, takes charge and tells Elkin not to go in for hunger strikes that might result in his death, since the regime is near its end, and honest revolutionaries will be needed. They live in a stifling atmosphere, made more unbearable for the reader, reading the book in 1939, when it was published, by the knowledge that there would be no comebacks. But the novelist was unable to write of that annihilation as yet. This would come a little later, with *The Case of comrade Tulayev*. Despite the handling of the destruction of the party, this is less gloomy than *Midnight in the Century*. Though *Tulayev* is written on a large canvas, one of the best ways of looking at the contrasting assessments of Serge and Trotsky is to consider the last Bolsheviks.

By 1934, when the Party Congress saw an apparently complete unanimity (it was called the 'Victors' Congress'), the Trotskyists in the Soviet Union seemed to have been utterly routed. Yet by 1936-37 Stalin seemed more afraid of them than ever. Paradoxically, the purges in the party, the massive scale of the new deportations, had strengthened the Trotskyists. In *Midnight*, Serge depicted the Trotskyists in 1934, in their worst year of isolation. In *Tulayev*, set after the Bukharin-Rakovsky Trial, in 1938, the bloody purges are almost finished. So difficult is it to get an authentic Trotskyist for a fresh show trial, that the suicide of Ryzhik creates an all-round crisis. But what happened in between is something not touched upon by Serge, except in very brief passages. Merle Fainshod, reconstructing the history of this period on the basis of captured Soviet archives, showed that in Smolensk, even in 1936-37, workers often pointed to Trotsky or Zinoviev as model Bolsheviks, and school children, called to a meeting to commemorate Kirov, proposed

that Trotsky be included in the honorary presidium. All such culprits, including the children, were duly deported as Trotskyists.²⁴ Prisons and forced labour camps had again become schools for training revolutionaries. The Trotskyists, fighting since 1923-4, well organised, with a clearer political analysis than most, led the struggles in the camps demanding improvement in conditions. Stalin realised soon, that he was aiding rather than smashing the revolutionary opposition. So he now set out to exterminate them. The Moscow frame ups were the show pieces, which hired hacks in the West justified. Behind them were the closed door kangaroo courts or simply decrees by which masses of oppositionists were murdered silently. By May, Trotskyists had been almost finished.

Both Serge and Trotsky had watched with horror and anger the unfolding tragedy in Russia. But Trotsky had never grasped the enormity fully. As late as 1938, when he was drafting the programme of the Fourth International, he assumed that though a little in disarray, the Left Opposition still constituted a powerful element in Soviet society. "Petit-bourgeois democrats of the West, having but yesterday assayed the Moscow Trials as unalloyed gold, today repeat insistently that there is 'neither Trotskyism nor Trotskyists within the USSR'. They fail to explain, however, why all the purges are conducted under the banner of a struggle with precisely this danger. If we are to examine 'Trotskyism' as a finished programme, and, even more to the point, as an organisation, then unquestionably 'Trotskyism' is extremely weak in the USSR. However, its indestructible force stems from the fact that it expresses not only revolutionary tradition but also today's actual opposition of the Russian working class."²⁵ This was where Serge presented a different picture.

In *Midnight*, Serge had shown the opposition debating over strategy and tactics. In Stalin's jails and isolators, it had taken over the habits formed in the Tsarist underground. But these were of little avail when it faced state terrorism on an unheard of scale. What could one do with a Trotskyist who had survived till 1939? As we know, a handful did. They even survived, like Mikhail Baitalsky, till the collapse of the USSR. But in 1939, such people were amazing. Serge captures the mood well: "Deportee Ryzhik presented insoluble problems to numerous officials. What could one think of an engine driver who had escaped unscathed from thirty telescoped locomotives? Of his fellow combatants,

not one had survived. Prison had providentially protected him for over ten years, from 1928 on."²⁶

The career of the revolutionary is reviewed twice. The first time, it is through the eyes of a GPU official looking at his dossier. A St. Petersburg worker, member of the party since 1906, deported to the Lena in 1914, returned from Siberia in April 1917, supporter of the April Theses, active in the Civil War, friendly with Smilga, Rakovsky and Tukhachevsky (with the reference that these were enemies of the people executed in 1937). Then followed his career as oppositionist, starting from his partial support for the Workers' Opposition in 1921 to his career as Trotskyist.

Having been rediscovered, Ryzhik was too good a find to be left alone. Comrade Tulayev, a high functionary, had been killed by an unknown assailant. The secret police, under Stalin's proddings, was cooking up a new conspiracy trial. And it needed a real Trotskyist. So Ryzhik was ferreted out of his arctic sojourn. Shunted from prison to prison, he found the world utterly changed.

"Police, jailers, examiners, high officials – all climbers who had climbed aboard at the eleventh hour, ignorant ... — what did they know about the Revolution...? What use would anyone have for the last cry of the last Oppositionist, crushed under the machine like a rabbit under a tank."²⁷

But this pitiful image was not the only one given by Serge. His Bolsheviks are real humans, and so they have weaknesses. As Deutscher recorded, in private moments of grief Trotsky occasionally wavered. But these were stresses revealed only to Natalya Sedova. Only the death of Lev Sedov broke through his defences. For several days he did not even meet anyone. Serge's Ryzhik, too, feels hopelessness when he is totally alone. But the chapter, 'The Brink of Nothing', is as a whole an eloquent testament to the revolutionary nature of Bolshevism. In one transfer prison, Ryzhik meets Makarenko, a party member since 1922, expelled in 1934. During their conversation,

"Ryzhik clearly deciphered the hieroglyphics (perhaps he was the only person in the world to decipher them, and it gave him an agonizing feeling of vertigo)... He knew, almost by heart, the falsified reports of the three great trials; he knew all the available details of the minor

trials in Kharkov, Sverdlovsk, Novosibirsk, Tashkent, Krasnoyarsk, trials of which the world had not heard."²⁸

Even in *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky went on characterizing Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky as the Right wing of the party, as though the mid-1920s characterization of the Stalin faction as centrists was not being erased by his admission that it was the political face of an autonomous bureaucracy that, while arising from the proletariat, was cut off from the class and was carrying out a counter-revolution which could end only in capitalist restoration or a fresh workers' revolution. By contrast, Serge recognised in the Bukharinists Bolsheviks who had slipped up, not a pro-restoration right wing. Kiril Rublev in Tulayev is modelled somewhat after Bukharin. Yet Serge also distances Rublev from Bukharin, through repeated references, for example to Rublev's early reference to his fear of being arrested since the arrest of Bukharin. Rublev is a different sort of Bolshevik, the intellectual who had joined the party in the underground. But the difference between the Right Opposition and the Left Opposition is brought out sharply enough by Serge, even though he treats the Right Opposition also as Bolsheviks. Rublev tells his wife Dora, "It is the counter-revolution."²⁹ Yet he shouts, to convince himself, that those who assert that "it is better to die dishonoured, murdered by the Chief, than to denounce him to the international *bourgeoisie*...", are right.³⁰ The Bukharinist Opposition never took the struggle outside the party, indeed seldom outside the leadership structures. In 1927, Rublev had argued against the Trotskyists, saying that the proletarian party cannot degenerate, because if it does, then it is not a proletarian party.³¹ And now, in 1938, he can meet fellow revolutionaries, Philppov, who had been with him in Paris in emigration and in the Civil War, and the Pole Wladek, friend of Warsky and former member of the Polish Central Committee, only in woods some distance from Moscow. It is in conversation with them that he remarks: "Ever since they shot Nikolai Ivanovich, I have sensed that they were prowling around me, imperceptibly."³²

Rublev is (of course) arrested. But he does not collapse, like Erchov. Erchov, the Commissar for Justice, when arrested, quickly accepts that he must confess to whatever crimes he is asked to own up to. Rublev takes a different line. He refuses to answer his examiners' questions. He writes a long essay in prison, analysing the real

situation in the USSR. But when another old revolutionary Popov, who is in the Stalinist faction (but is doomed to die in the same way), comes and appeals to his party loyalty, Rublev, after telling Popov to go to hell, says:

"I have lived my whole life only for the Party. Sick and degraded though it may be, our Party. That I have neither thought nor conscience outside of the Party. That I am loyal to the Party, whatever it may be, whatever it may do. That if I must perish, crushed by my Party, I consent...." ³³

What had been a puzzling question to many, was why did Bukharin confess? After the murder of Zinoviev and Kamenev, he could not have expected any last moment grace. Rubashov and Rublev are two ways of trying to account for it. Today, we also know that Stalin held out the promise, not of his life, but of the life of his wife and young son, if he cooperated. But we also know, that he wrote four manuscripts in prison, which were kept in the deepest KGB dungeons till the fall of the USSR, and that in the trial, while he confessed, he also made a mockery of the prosecutor. That Serge makes Rublev write an essay is a coincidence, but one based on his personal knowledge of Bukharin, the intellectual considered by Lenin to be the 'favourite of the party'. But his mocking of Popov, of the investigating officials, all recall Bukharin, and in a far more realistic manner than Koestler's artificial Rubashov. And yet, right up to the end, he distinguishes between Rublev and Bukharin. Comrade Fleischman, an old Cheka member still in the GPU, goes through the papers before declaring that l'Affaire Tulayev is closed. And there he finds the dialogue of the dead, between the now executed Rublev, writing perhaps hours before his own execution, refuting Bukharin to say: "We have not lived on the brink of a dark abyss, as Nicolas Ivanovich said, for he was subject to attacks of nervous depression — we are on the eve of a new cycle of storms and that is what darkens our consciences."³⁴

The Voice of the Dictator:

But as I said earlier, unlike *Midnight in the Century*, *Tulayev* speaks with many tones. And Serge chooses, in this novel, to present Stalin

himself. Of course, dictators have always had writers presenting pretty pictures of them. Stalin was no exception. Soviet novelists like Ilin and others wrote about Stalin's simplicity, his modesty, his powers of intellect, his unshakeable faith in the masses, and the works.³⁵ Serge has Stalin appear in *Midnight* as well. But it is in *Tulayev* that the dictator gets extended treatment.

How does one treat the great historical figure in literature? Tolstoy took up the issue in *War and Peace*. Stalin was not just a great historical figure, but one of the twentieth century's two greatest dictators, at one level a monster responsible for the murder of millions of people. Orwell portrayed him as the invisible tyrant who is omniscient and omnipresent. But Serge chooses, despite his hatred of Stalin, to present him as a human being. In this polyphonic novel, where he is also firmly an anti-Stalinist, Serge enters into dialogue with the main characters and refuses to impose his own views on them. This does not mean a moral (or amoral) relativism. He simply sees no sense in bludgeoning the reader. He takes sides, but without throttling Stalin's own voice. Romachkin reads Stalin's speech, and is frightened when he even thinks silently that Stalin has lied. Stalin is set against a couple living across the hall in the apartments where Romachkin also lives. "In the half-light, the Chief's massive profile was superimposed on the figure of the man who was silently beating his wife in the room across the hall. Would she ever escape from her bondage? Shall we ever escape from falsehood?" ³⁶ The silent victim of domestic violence is linked to the massive victimisation of the peoples of the USSR.

The pluralism in *Tulayev* is itself a rejoinder to the monologue that discourse became under Stalinism. Trotsky was certainly alive to this transformation. But what the embattled revolutionary could offer was only a promise for the future. He made a clear self criticism for the ban on opposition parties and the ban on factions within the Bolshevik Party, and for the future the Transitional Programme talked about the legalisation of Soviet parties. But when writing about the present, when analysing the Revolution Betrayed, he gave Stalinism voice only in order to bluntly refute it. Reading Serge, listening to the voice of Ryzhik, of Rublev, of the careerists who manage to make a good living even in the middle of the mass murders and the frightful condition of the ordinary people, even of Stalin's own voice, we feel that even totalitarian

dictatorships do not really flatten out all differences and create a consistent monologue.

Within this general picture, Serge's insertion of Stalin stands in total contrast both to the hagiographic novels and to Orwell or Koestler's strategies. Romachkin was walking in the public gardens bordering the outer walls of the Kremlin and eating a sandwich when he saw Stalin.

"Tall, almost gaunt, the visor of his military cap pulled down over his eyes, his uniform bare of insignia, his face hard, bristlingly moustached, and inconceivably sensual, the man stepped out of the portraits published in the papers, displayed four stories high on buildings, hung in offices... It was *He*."³⁷

I cannot discuss Trotsky's *Stalin* at length here. But if we look at a short 1939 essay published originally in *Life* magazine, we discover that his burning hatred towards the liquidator of the heritage of Bolshevism and the proletarian revolution weakens his assessment. How the young Iossif became a Marxist is hardly explained. Anecdotes are strung together, with comments like this: "in the period of the October Revolution, Stalin, more than anybody else, perceived his career as a series of failures."³⁸ Yet a couple of sentences down the reader learns that at this point Stalin was a member of the leading team, even of the Political Bureau. Trotsky commented, "It is not Stalin who created the machine. The machine created Stalin."³⁹ While this was true in a broad historical sense, it did not explain the immense concentration of power by Stalin and his role in the 1930s. The age of the bureaucratic elite, where the leader was only the voice of the machine, was the age of Brezhnev. In the period of its rise, the bureaucracy needed a leader with a real revolutionary past. This comes across much better in Serge's novel.

Here Stalin is not an impersonal power. He is a character in the novel. This is developed in Stalin's conversations with Kondratiev. It is in these, and in the way Stalin is handled, that Serge rises above Trotsky. Stalin and Kondratiev who are friends, having fought side by side during the civil war, in spite of the fact that Kondratiev has his doubts about the evolution of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Now allowing Stalin to be the subject of speech is a way of abandoning temporarily the discourse on the dictator and giving him an opportunity to justify himself, to show himself as a human being, as a person capable

of thought, of emotions, of doubts. Listening to Stalin's voice, one does not feel that this is a cold-blooded monster, as Solzhenitsyn wanted to show him. This is, rather, a lonely person at the top for whom the author lets his readers feel pity.

Kondratiev is back from Spain, where he has been part of the soviet team wiping out the left wing revolutionaries. He was partially responsible for the abduction and murder of the Trotskyist Stefan Stern, who is probably developed from Erwin Wolf. Kondratiev returns in a hurry, because he had been soft about Stern, and fears a negative report may damage him. But when he meets Stalin, the leader says, "Brother, veterans like you, members of the old Party, must tell me the whole truth.... From top to bottom they all lie, it's diabolical.... Nauseating.... I live on the summit of an edifice of lies."⁴⁰ Dictators are often shown as lonely, but here, Serge provides a very human dimension. Yet the truth that Stalin craves, and which Kondratiev tries to tell, is not without risk, when one decides to say what one really thinks to a totalitarian dictator. If conversation was always founded on reciprocity and theoretical equality, especially when it is between two old friends who had hunted and fought together, speaking difficult truths should not be that painful. But when one of the friends has absolute power over the life and death of millions, and when he reminds the other casually that "I'll wipe out every one of them, tirelessly, mercilessly.... I do what must be done. Like a machine"⁴¹, it seems impossible. The difficulty is having an innocent conversation with someone who has the right to life and death, who can send you to the Gulag or even have you executed for the slightest criticism you may have uttered. Makeyev is enmeshed in the Tulayev murder case because he had exclaimed to his wife that it had served Tulayev right! Kondratiev himself, as an intimate of the Chief, is as it were contaminated by this aura of death: while telling Stalin that the new tanks have a breakdown percentage in combat of 35 %, he becomes aware that he is unwillingly laying the foundation of another trial for sabotage. His attempts to prove that inferior quality may be due to technical reasons are futile, as we see in case of planes, for the Chief tells him the designer was carrying out sabotage, as proved by his confession. The polyphony is continually subverted by the dictator's ability to silence the voices of others — like Stefan Stern, like even the relatively harmless Xenia.

Despite the discursive imbalance, Kondratiev does tell Stalin the truth, not only about the Spanish situation, where defeat is staring the republican regime in the face, but also about the USSR. His first reference to the situation in the USSR is a cryptic, but damaging one — "The older generation is getting scarce..."⁴² Stalin, Kondratiev, and all Serge's readers would realise that the scarcity, only twenty years after a revolution made by relatively young people (in 1917 Lenin at 47 was one of the oldest, Trotsky and Stalin had both been 38, people like Bukharin and Pyatakov had been in their late twenties and early thirties) was not due to natural deaths but the mass murders. A little later, Kondratiev tells Stalin directly, "I think that you were wrong in 'liquidating' Nicolai Ivanovich."⁴³ Was this an argument by Serge that one could be honest and upright even in the face of totalitarianism? Such a reading is too simple, since honesty gets Ryzhik nowhere. It seems he is balancing the possibility of a communist sticking to his point with the absolute power of the Chief. This absolute power is what saves Kondratiev. As the Kondratiev files move along bureaucratic lines, they encounter the personal intervention of the Chief, who condemns, suddenly, the criminal confusion of names between one Kondratenko, who had voted for the Opposition in 1927, and Kondratiev, who had been a good Stalinist of the old type (that is, a communist who had supported the Stalin faction).

And it is at the second conversation with Stalin that he learns of his reprieve. From the beginning to the end, this dialogue is constructed with care. The Chief tells Kondratiev, "so you are a traitor too?", and Kondratiev replies, "I am not a traitor either". The last word was enough to damn him as a hidden supporter of the Trotskyite-Bukharinist-fascist conspirators, for by it he was denouncing the three show trials and the action against millions murdered or sent off to the Gulag. Kondratiev tells Stalin that despite everything he is still loyal to Stalin, but he regrets the loss of the revolutionaries. "Their end has left me with an almost unbearable regret: what men they were! What men! [if I have one serious objection to Serge, it is his failure to show the Bolsheviks — the roughly 2500 female Bolsheviks who were part of the Old Guard, who fought in the underground, in the year 1917 and in the civil war as hard as their male counterparts, and whose fates mirrored those of the men] History takes millennia to produce men so great! Incorruptible,

intelligent, formed by thirty or forty decisive years, and pure, pure! Let me speak, you know that I am right. You are like them yourself, that is your essential worth..." (So Cain and Abel, born of the same womb under the same stars...)"⁴⁴

It is difficult to think that this is Serge's own view. Rather, true to his attempt to create a polyphonic novel, this is the view of the Bolsheviks who had sided with Stalin. Many such, in the 1930s, protested when they saw that Stalin was not content with defeating the oppositions but wanted to annihilate them. Many, too, were still moved by scruples inherited from Bolshevism in many other ways. And so, in the years before the Kirov murder, they had made their last stand, resisting Stalin's calls for annihilation, which had been first made at the time of the Riutin case (Riutin had been a Central Committee member who had written a document saying Trotsky had been right on the need for political democracy while Bukharin had been right in his economic analysis — a Trotskyite-Bukharinist if ever there was one). Many Stalinists too were killed, and in their cases, without any show trials. But some of these people did indeed protest. So did lesser people. Boris Pasternak's intercessions saved the lives of some people. Kondratiev stands in for such people. And he is one of the lucky ones, for Stalin decides to save him.

"Enough of that. I have made my decision. You will leave for eastern Siberia, you will receive your appointment tomorrow morning. Do not lose a day....the Valley of Gold... Our Klondike...."⁴⁵

Stalin is not just the Other. He is within every Stalinist, every Bolshevik who took a series of turns. They cannot reject Stalin even when death stares at them. As Kondratiev tells Stalin in course of an imaginary dialogue, "History has played us this rotten trick: we have only you"⁴⁶ Confronted by Stalin's unexpected mercy, Kondratiev's first reaction is to protest, which he suppresses. His second is to exclaim and thank Stalin. This too he suppresses. But this duality indicates the crisis of sincere communists who accepted the need to support the policies of the Soviet government and party despite Stalin. For such people, when the state, in the name of the revolution, demands a sacrifice, it is difficult to reject it. Much more than Bukharin, it was the loyal Stalinist who was caught in the worst bind.

The remark "we have only you" was the cry of the old Stalinist. For the younger generation, Serge suggests, Stalin was perfectly dispensable. But Serge's strategy was certainly the reason why his book fell through the trap door of history. What Moscow needed were hagiographies. What the Cold Warriors in the West needed were supplied better by Koestler, and, through a superficial reading, Orwell in 1984.⁴⁷ To create a human rather than a monster Stalin, to show him possessing weaknesses, including that of friendship, for it is simply that which ultimately saves Kondratiev, was to make it useless for a propaganda piece. As a proletarian revolutionary fighter, Serge argued and fought for a vision of socialism not just free of bureaucracy, but free of authoritarianism of all sorts. As an analyst, he appears weak at points. His casual reference to state capitalism in *Tulayev* is not backed up by the attempts made by others such as Tony Cliff, C.L.R. James or Raya Dunayevskaya to prove their cases. Weissman argues that Serge was closer to holding a 'new class' theory. This ambiguity suggests that he put forward more questions and insightful comments than complete answers. But on the other hand, as I have tried to argue, his fiction presented a more rounded understanding of everyday Stalinism than did Trotsky's writings. He had a faith in the positive development of society. It sits perhaps less securely on his shoulder than on that of Deutscher, because it contrasted with his view of a new class emerging. But nonetheless, he seemed to think, or hope, for a relative liberalisation under the bureaucratic regime. Where Orwell asked his reader to imagine that a jackboot stamping on a human face forever was the future of humankind, Serge asked them, in the end, to imagine a period when there would be no Stalin, and a reduction of the terror.

Hopes for the Future:

Too much can be made out of such differences between Serge and Trotsky. My point is different. It is useful to read both, and to see how many ways existed of creating resistance to the bureaucratic dictatorship. Serge the essayist obviously found that he could not get all his ideas across, and so turned to the novel cycle. Trotsky's burning essays, his books, condemn Stalin. They call for a future revolution. Today, we are in possession of enough archival data to know that Trotsky was hardly

in error in denouncing Stalin as a criminal. Even for Hitler's rise to power, Stalin's role was greater than preaching sectarianism.⁴⁸ But if we try to reduce the entire Stalinist experience to Stalin, and the period when bureaucratic power was established through brutality and mass terror, we would be unable to explain the history of the post-Stalin period. Trotsky himself did not expect the Stalinist regime to last beyond World War II, and considerable refinements would be needed in his analysis.⁴⁹ Serge was trying to argue a case, showing why the Russian revolution would be revived by the Soviet proletariat. Unlike western liberal theorists of totalitarianism, he did not believe that totalitarianism could only be overthrown from outside. Like Trotsky, he saw the revolutionary potential of the Soviet working class. So he ending of *Tulayev* presents us with three images. We have the dialogue of the dead, between Rublev and Bukharin. We have Fleischman burning Kostya's letter, saying he had murdered Tulayev all by himself, and driving to the stadium where an Athletic Festival was in progress. And finally we have the young athletes and soldiers. Kostya survives, and Fleischman knows he can do nothing useful about it. Burning the letter is not a pro-Stalinist statement. It is an ironic statement, where Serge shows that notions of crime have little to do with the purges and the terror. The aim of the Terror was to reconquer everyday Stalin's right to rule the USSR. Fleischman accepts it, in order to survive. But though important, though a member of the hierarchy, he is empty, a spent force. The future belongs to the youth. Yet this youth will have a difficult time coming to grips with class struggle and socialism, after all the lies told in the name of socialism.

The last word from *Tulayev* can go to Stefan Stern. He argues,

"There are not more than fifty men on earth who understand Einstein: If they were shot on the same night, it would be all over for a century or two — or three, how do we know? A whole vision of the universe would vanish into nothingness."⁵⁰

To retie the thread of history when it has snapped is no easy matter, and even if everyone, literally, was not shot, the revolutionary continuity was damaged badly enough so that the revival of classical Marxism with its stress on proletarian self-emancipation and workers' revolution has been successfully pushed back. Serge with the novelist's vision saw this

better than the historian-activist Trotsky, where the one-foot-in-utopia attitude pushed him constantly towards predicting and hoping for (and conflating hope and prediction based on analysis) more positive outcomes. Revolutionary politics needs both. Only a passive hope for change would be counterproductive, as the career and role of Deutscher sometimes suggests. Only a constant prediction of revolution would be sterile radicalism incapable of understanding living reality and taking part in politics.

What united Trotsky and Serge was their hope for a proletarian socialist future, and their hostility to both world capitalism and Stalinism. What kept them away was secondary, though at the moment they seemed to view it as very important. Reading Serge's novels today, one finds less difference in the sense of opposition or conflict, and more than two ways of understanding what was after all a unique development in world history. Serge, precisely because he was writing a novel, could split his Bolshevik faces in a way that the revolutionary politician writing history and political analysis simultaneously, with an eye on the future, hoping for an anti-bureaucratic revolution, could not do. Even the contrast between the phenomenon of Stalin as a dictator in the eyes of the historian Trotsky, and Stalin as a human being, a product of circumstances in the literary etching of the character in context that we find in Serge, testifies to the difference in aims and operations of these two discourses — the discourse of history and that of literature. In his novels, Serge does not therefore present a simple and linear picture of the revolution — perhaps that is the task of history as it is still mostly written. For the novelist, however, an understanding of the historical meaning of revolution compels him to return again and again to the contradictions in the revolutionary society, and therefore ambiguity remains throughout his novels.

Let us, at the end, recall again the chilling rendezvous between Rhyzik and Makarenko in the transfer prison. Serge's explication of Rhyzik's horror is a human testament of the terrifying reality for the communists who were systematically being exterminated by a machine that they had themselves helped to produce. The immense significance of this testament is that it is on such vouchsafing that history is meant to be written. But of course the discourse of history by definition operates differently, as we have seen in our contrast between Serge and

Trotsky. So these words may also be read as a manifesto of the witness novel as a genre — predicated upon history, no doubt, but literature, nonetheless, and of crucial importance because it is literature :

"Between the hundreds of thousands of lines of the published texts, weighted down with innumerable lies, he saw other hieroglyphics, equally bloody but pitilessly clear. And each hieroglyphic was human: a name, a human face with changing expressions, a voice, a portion of living history.... If he had credited himself with the slightest poetic faculty, Rhyzik would have allowed himself to become intoxicated by the spectacle of that powerful collective brain, that brain which brought together thousands of brains to perform its work during a quarter of a century, now destroyed in a few years by the backlash of its very victory, now perhaps reflected only in his own mind as in a thousand-faceted mirror.... All snuffed out, those brains: all disfigured, those faces, all smeared with blood."⁵¹

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11. K. Fedin, *No Ordinary Summer*, 2 vols, FLPH, Moscow, 1950.
12. Alexei Tolstoy, *Ordeal*, <http://home.frecuk.com/russica4/>. (There have been different English translations of *Khozhdeniye Po Mukam*, written between 1922 and 1941. At present I do not have any of the editions. However, the version entitled *Ordeal* has been put up on the net, using a copyright gap.)

13. About the Trotskyists who held out and resisted, one of the most moving testimony comes from Leopold Trepper, the mastermind of the Soviet spy network in Europe during World War II. In his autobiography, he writes: "But who protested at that time? Who rose up to cry out disgust? The Trotskyists can claim this honour. Like their leader, who paid for his obstinacy with a blow from an ice-axe, they fought Stalinism totally, and they stood alone. By the time of the great purges, they could cry out their revolt only in the frozen vastness, where they had been dragged the better to exterminate them. Their conduct in the camps was dignified and even exemplary. But their voices were lost in the tundra.... They had a coherent political system that could replace Stalinism and to which they could cling in the profound anguish of the revolution betrayed. They did not "confess", for they knew that their confession would serve neither the party nor socialism". Leopold Trepper, *Le Grand Jeu*, Paris, 1975, p. 64. I have dealt with this in greater details in a later section.
14. For Kollontai, I am indebted to the analysis in Soma Marik, 'Alexandra Kollontai — The Love of Worker Bees in Historical Context' (forthcoming, in an anthology edited by Tanika Sarkar and Kumkum Roy).
15. P. Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921*, New York, 1974, pp. 51 - 4.
16. E. Mawdsley, 'The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt Mutiny' *Soviets Studies*, vol. 24, No. 4, April, 1973, p. 509, J. Rees, 'In Defence of October', *Society and Change*, vol. VIII, no. 2, July-September 1991 p. 63.
17. Quoted in W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory*, New York, 1989, p. 495.
18. The debate over Kronstadt has shown no signs of ending. The most interesting point, from my point of view, is that Anarchists use the Kronstadt revolt to attack Bolshevism, and that they use it particularly against Trotsky. This goes back to the Spanish Civil War, Trotsky's criticism of the Spanish anarchists, and the responses by anarchists from outside Spain to him. Two issues are involved here. One is Trotsky's personal responsibility. In his writings, he always accepted political responsibility, but refused to accept personal responsibility. It was Zinoviev, who was already beginning to treat the Northern Commune as a personal fief, who was responsible for the brutal and rude dismissals of all attempts at compromise.
19. L. Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, New York, 1976, p. 9.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Victor Serge, *Midnight in the Century*, London, 1982, p. 56.
22. See for a detailed analysis, Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'Samajik Fascibad' (Social Fascism), *Itihas Anusandhan 12*, (Proceedings of the 13th Conference of the Padhm Banga Itihas Samsad), Calcutta 1997, and Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'The Communist Party of Germany, the Theory of Social Fascism and Hitler's Rise to Power', *History*, Journal of the Department of History, Burdwan University, vol. 1, 1998.
23. The *Bulletin of the Opposition* edited by Trotsky and published abroad. Till 1933-34, issues were being smuggled in, though Blumkin, a former Socialist Revolutionary who had joined the Bolshevik Party, and had gone to visit Trotsky when he was exiled in Prinkipo, had been shot for doing that even in the early 1930s.
24. M. Fainshod, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule*, London, 1959, pp. 2322-7, 302f.
25. Leon Trotsky, 'The USSR and Problems of the Transitional Epoch, from The Transitional Program of the Fourth International, 1938, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1938/tia38.htm>
26. Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 218.
27. *Ibid.* p. 237
28. *Ibid.* p. 241-42
29. *Ibid.* p. 76.
30. *Ibid.* p. 77
31. *Ibid.* p. 85.
32. *Ibid.* p. 84.
33. *Ibid.* p. 216.
34. *Ibid.* p. 362.
35. Margaret Ziolkowski, 'A Modern Demonology: Some Literary Stalins', *Slavic Review*, 1991, vol. 50, no. 1, p. 61-62
36. Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, p. 21.
37. *Ibid.* p. 29.
38. L. Trotsky, *Portraits: Political and Personal*, New York, 1977, p. 215.
39. *Ibid.* p. 219.
40. Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, p. 157.
41. *Ibid.* p. 172.
42. *Ibid.* p. 170.
43. *Ibid.* p. 171.
44. *Ibid.* p. 288. Interestingly, since the Moscow Trials, Trotsky constantly referred to Stalin as Cain-Stalin or Cain-Dzugashevilli.
45. *Ibid.* p. 291.
46. *Ibid.* pp. 258-259.
47. I have argued elsewhere that 1984 was as much a critique of elements in Western society. See Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'Anyo Chokhe Orwell', *Digangan*, New Delhi, Festival Issue 1984.

48. I have dealt with this in Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'The Communist Party of Germany, the Theory of Social Fascism and Hitler's Rise to Power', *History*, Journal of the Department of History.
49. Theorists of state capitalism always pointed to this lasting character of Stalinism as proof that it was not a "bureaucratically degenerated workers' state", to use Trotsky's term. We cannot discuss these issues in the present essay, for Serge's own treatments in the novels are too sketchy, as I have written above. The interested reader can consult Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money*, London, 1992, for a development of Trotsky's analysis; Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, London 1974, for a well-know State capitalist theory originating from Trotskyism; and several collections where Mandel debates State Capitalist / Social Imperialist theories, for example *Readings in State Capitalism*, London, 1973..
50. Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, p. 153.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

Epsita Halder

KNOWING HOW TO GIVE BIRTH: NARRATING THE LIVES OF BAGHARU AND MATHARIR MA IN *TISTAPARER BRITTANTO*

"[w]hen there is no light in the complete darkness of night except from the stars in the sky, when there is no radiation except from the foamy currents of Tista, then, from the depths of water, she, Mother Tortoise, who makes her way up against the southward river flow, once, in the silence below the sky and above the water, while floating up, stretches her throat against the sky, and calls, "He-y khanjon, Hey Phariiga, Bau-ge-ey." This call has something primordial about it, the way the moss on the tree roots bears the age of the tree more ancient than two or four human generations. Perhaps you should not know about the call. Not all things are for human knowledge. Humans need not know all things. Humans also want to not know some things." (Debes Roy, *Tistapuran*, 2000, p 65)

In this extract, the attributes of river Tista are represented and interpreted in a language that transcends the scientific and rational language of physical science, geology, geography etc. . The narration becomes a respectful defamiliarization of the river as conceptualized in scientific discourses. Adding mythical elements like Mother Tortoise, the narrative explores a particular imagination of the Rajbongshi community and its relationship with instantaneous nature that offers a particular ethics of knowledge. From the tone of the narrator we can assume that there is an inherent critique of a specific knowledge system — namely, the modern androcentric rational scientific knowledge system — which considers nature only in its materiality, reduces it as a thing-in-subordination.

In feminist philosophies, we can find a parallel approach where feminists have attempted to equate subordination of women in patriarchal normative structure with subordination of nature. I will try to analyse some portions of *Tistaparer Brittanto* (pub 1987) by Debes Roy to put forth a discussion on how feminist philosophies have critiqued the value

neutrality of science, the notion of a disembodied objective knower and the burial of feminine experience as a non-viable mode of knowledge, to offer a feminine-experience based epistemology.

Primarily, I would like to sum up the endeavours of feminist philosophers to substantiate the question: what is the different perspective that women may offer to disrupt the notion of an objective knower and the relationship between the knower and the known?

I analyze the 'assignment of subject-positions' to Matharir Ma and Bagharu in *Tistaparer Brittanto*, to question the universality of some analytical categories conceptualized and proposed by philosophies like *experience*, *body* and *gender*. Simultaneously, I would like to understand the implications of this approach in the study of literature.

I

Broadly, according to feminists, in the authoritative and homogenizing scientific discourse, women's bodily experiences are not only missed out but excluded from scientific methods of abstraction and objectivity as women are unable to articulate themselves through the scientific symbolic. The "experience of women" is introduced in science as apparently inassimilable and pre-discursive. (Whitford, p 149).

Feminist standpoint theorists have argued that the distinct experience of women in a gender-stratified society provides an important resource that enables "feminism to produce empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations than does conventional research" (Harding, 1991, p 119)

This alternative model based on women's differences, both social-discursive and epistemological, from men and other women, can be discussed in three broad steps:

- (i) replacing the traditional model of the knower as a detached, disinterested individual, with the dynamic model of engaged, committed individuals in communities;
- (ii) recognizing the epistemic value of affective processes;
- (iii) examining of the role of embodiment in the knowledge process (Tuana, 1997, p 18)

The traditional androcentric 'Man, the hunter' account of evolution depicts gathering — the activities of women — as 'natural' 'home-based' and biologically determined. Feminists, instead of reversing the model,

tried to restore the importance of these activities by constructing them as social and skilled. It requires a large body of 'knowledge', according to them, to decide which plant to eat (ibid, p 20).

Infiltration of social values and context into the practice of science problematizes the traditional model of the knower as detached, disembodied and autonomous. Now, 'traditional' science depicts affect, dependence, connectedness and engagement, etc. as feminine attributes. A subjective component in the knowing process connects the knower with the known in a bond of affect, disrespecting the traditional proposed split and incommensurable gap between the subject and the object of his/her study. The way Barbara McClintock describes herself as having developed a close relationship with the object of her investigation — the seedlings of maize — illustrates an overt metaphysical value attached to the object which deviates from the positivist assumptions of scientific thought (Keller, 1983, p 179). This McClintockian idea that "the complexities of nature is beyond full human comprehension" and her method of "letting the material tell you" subverts the Enlightenment model according to which nature was the mute and passive 'other' of human civilization. It was this same attitude which validated the notion that 'nature' was just the provider of raw materials to be extracted by man for his material wellbeing. McClintock was one of the forerunners who paved the way for different philosophical shifts in feminism, specially relating to the ethics of knowing the other or care ethics, a specific relationship between the self and its other based on an interactive model on the one hand, and on the other, the possibility of a metaphysical reconfiguration of nature within ecofeminist discourses.

As a relatively new movement, ecofeminism attempts to bring feminist insights to environmental ethics¹. Ecofeminists recognize, working within western patriarchal norm, a "logic of domination" applied both to women and nature which creates them as conceptually synonymous terms that are replaceable and interchangeable.

Assuming that "the feminine" offers a better understanding of the biological engagement between human beings and nature, ecofeminism privileges the biological female body as the mystique reservoir of the principles of nature (and the cult of Goddess worship as a protest against the angry male god²).

"[w]omen's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature. (Salleh, 1984, p 340)

By valorizing "the feminine" and "the feminine principle" (Vandana Shiva, 1990, p 193), some ecofeminists fall into the trap of essentializing them as feminine virtue, which can be the byproduct of patriarchy. They fail to engage with the category of the feminine as gender roles historically defined and culturally and ideologically perpetuated within the patriarchal normative as a mode of subordination (Plumwood, 1991, p 12; Davion, 1994, p 14-15).

Within the linked domain of postcolonial science studies and postcolonial studies (both in the west and in the post-colonies) there have been attempts to write an anti-Eurocentric account of European expansion followed by a re-valuation of non-Western paradigms of science and technology (as indigenous/local knowledge systems) and re-consideration of the 'under-developed'. The 'localness' of knowledge gives space to explore local subjectivities as epistemic agents and to reclaim the practical community knowledge over rational individual and propositional knowledge. These analyses point out that the cognitive features of modern science and technology are culturally specific – culturally local – and cannot be imposed upon the non-Western countries which have specific and different cultural ideals, different ways of producing and organizing knowledge for a different end. When imposed, it is by domination of the Empire, the North. Multicultural and global feminist theorists have not only invoked the post colonies in a framework of difference, they have proposed the idea of the 'Local Knowledge System'(LKS) along the axis of sexual difference.

... [i]nsofar as gender exists in any culture – women and men will have different knowledge. One can see the development theorists arguing that through a culture's gender relations, women and men at least partially tend to interact with different parts of nature's regularities... organize differently the production of knowledge...the LKS is women's first person knowledge of their pregnant bodies, their "bodily knowledge" and in a second case, when the LKS is their "emotional knowledge" of frail elderly kin for whom they are caretaker. (Harding, 1998, p 276)

Surprisingly, in this retrieval of women's skills and emotional engagements as generating knowledge, there is a tendency of overt homogenization of women's experience through a monolithic concept of gender organization. Third world feminists like Vandana Shiva have explained the territorial expansion of the Empire in terms of political, cultural and ideological aggression and proposed an alternative to the Third World development as residing in 'the feminine principle' — *Prakriti* and *Shakti*. Her Third World ecofeminism, founded on the radical difference between the East and the West, however occludes the essentializing and romanticizing thrust in her theory when she focuses on Third World women's experience as a highly privileged category.

At this point, my question would be: what is experience? Is it ontologically determined, or is it the amalgamation of different locations of identity and experiences of different identities? Does experience not show the mechanism of the production of a subject, the mechanism of power which produces the subject? Is not 'privileged' materiality of the body a production of phallocentrism? What is the significance of the 'localness' of knowledge? Does experience have a gender? Can the feminine experience be universal to be an alternative? Is gender a static category?

How can I deploy these theoretical questions when I am reading a 'subaltern text' like *Tistaparer Brittanto*?

II

Ethnographers and feminist scholars have attempted to re-turn to the aborigine/primitive/subaltern communities to restore subject positions by exploring (female) rites, skills and practical knowledge (Anne Pattel-Gray, 2001, p 60). The graceful and skilled bodies embodying ritualistic knowledge can be read as a critique of the position allotted to these communities within the historical progression of modern state as non-historical, merely physical and non-representable. But, sometimes the tendency to celebrate the sacred rites and community skill has a non-critical engagement with the past and the 'past-within' (primitive/subaltern communities who may be present simultaneously within a modern time-frame) when the intention is to present a gendered alternative to the objective androcentric Western science and technology (Shiva, 1990)

In the novel *Tistaparar Brittanto*, I would like to focus on two characters, Bagharu and Matharir Ma, to understand, to describe and analyze the issues I have raised above and to create a critical space for the third world subaltern in this paper.

In *Tistaparar Brittanto* (henceforth TPB) Matharir Ma appears, abruptly, without any narrative clue, after 436 pages of the 504-page book, to be there roughly for 24 pages, albeit not as the central character in every page. She enters in the chapter of the novel in *Antaparva* which is subtitled 'Matharir Ma's separate and autonomous state', and inhabits the space till 'Return of Matharir Ma to her Home State' — the last chapter in *Antaparva*. The author ends the fragmented narrative of Matharir Ma there, because her narrative has no 'progression', it cannot become a female *bildungsroman*. What she lives, she lives everyday; her everyday living/life is complete, autonomous, and independent. It simply repeats the previous day without any variation. It does not fall into the progressive linear narratives of nation state and development, because, the novel shows that she has not been allotted any space within the nation. Her presence is foreclosed there. Her life epitomizes the lives of "8 billion Indians who live like animals in the forest" (TPB, p 491), and national denominators like 'poverty line', 'Backward Section of the Society': do not, and cannot, touch her. As the narrator says, "Those who know how to use pen and ink in India, like us, they do not know in which language the poorest of the poor of India can be written about" (TPB, p 491).

Moreover, I intend to say that Matharir Ma's body and sexuality and her journey through procreative cycles can neither be understood within the mainstream, patriarchal, familial developmental discourse of Indian modernity nor within the critique of it like Vandana Shiva's. The materiality of her body, and the socio-affective processes of her being can only show the limits of these discourses and ask for a different set of tools to understand her.

In Matharir Ma's autonomous and separate state, she lives with Matharir beside the National Highway which goes through the Forest. She is not touched by the construction of Tista Dam, consequent debates and the political demands for autonomy of the Uttarkhanda Andolan coalescing around the ethnic/caste identity of the Rajbongshis, just like Bagharu, a bonded laborer of Gayanath, an influential Rajbongshi *jotdar* ("feudal proprietor"). My endeavour would be to situate these two characters in the milieu

of local reality and thereby unpack the categories like 'experience', 'gendered experience', 'embodiment' and 'knowledge', thus breaking open the essentialism and universalism of some feminist schools of thought.

Matharir Ma remains in the narrative of the nation, albeit foreclosed. Finally, when she is narrativized in this novel, when the foreclosure ends, her way of being a woman in the narrative space of *Tistaparar Brittanto*, shows up limits in the imagination and conceptualization of womanhood in both nationalistic and eco-feminist discourses. The narrator keeps on designating her habitat as (an)other *state* made by her — autonomous and separate — because India does not enter there and she cannot cross the border of her 'nation' to enter India.

Matharir returned from the haat and said, "Ma, tomorrow there will be a procession. Trucks will come from the haat".

There can be a procession, then trucks are likely to come. How will people go otherwise? So, Matharir Ma had nothing more to ask. Matharir had nothing more to tell. (TPB, p 439)

In the world which lacks language — a medium of communication, a tool to express oneself as a part of attaining subjecthood — what would Matharir Ma do? Can she think? Does she lack language, or does she lack the faculty of thinking which actually produces language? A skeptical thought surfaces on whether she is rendered outside the flow of history and civilization as she is devoid of tools of socialization. Maybe she has a certain aim in life, which may be to turn Shyaulajhora into a sacred place to make passing truckers throw money as a form of worship.

But, there is a limit to Matharir Ma's thought process. She who is compelled to live near to the forest, may be inside the forest, beside a vague waterfall, in a forest land cleared during the construction of the National Highway, and so her thought must not be that strong/powerful. (TPB, p 441)

Can Bagharu think? We will come to Bagharu in the final part of this essay. Because, here, in Matharir Ma's state they never meet. However, their not meeting can give rise to a nagging question for the standpoint theorists that I would propose in my conclusion. Here, in the ceremony to open the Tista Dam, Matharir meets Bagharu, they start a new journey and Matharir Ma returns home alone, "losing her last son" (emphasis mine).

Why has the narrator indicated Matharir as his mother's last son? Has she stopped menstruating or is she totally disillusioned about the

sons she has been giving birth to since ages, sons who simply slip away whenever they attain suitable age. She cannot even recall the number of her sons. Matharir Ma needs a son, otherwise who will help her carry fire in leaves and twigs back home for miles, who would sit beside the fire when she boils rice in the darkness. But, it cannot become a *putra bhimo matridoiuno ke kare mochan* situation or who but the son will allay the mother's misfortune situation, because this mother-son dyad cannot represent the national patriarchal imagination. Matharir Ma's body does not become the body of the mother-nation, because her sons do not return the psychosexual affect invested by their mother. Nor is she the distressed mother — *Ma ki hoiachhen* — waiting to be rescued by her sons. What to her is the significance of giving birth, what is the affective coding?

Debes Roy creates a detailed narration of Matharir Ma's past, the way she entered into coupling, repetitively, with different men. As she was not the wife of these men (she did not intend to, or maybe she was unaware of the marriage system or did not care for it) the makeshift home does not become a 'domestic' space. Later, when she was living with Mathari alone, her labour could not be designated as domestic labour. She fails to create something called the domestic around her, it is only the mimicry/parody of the domestic when she is with a man and sleeps with him. Undoubtedly, she was a woman of desire, she can even remember the soap that the father of her first son gave her, but her sexual transactions remain mere biology; they cannot even become socio-biology. She is neither a wife, where the erotic-affective meaning of the use value of her body can secure her a position in the sexual-familial economy, nor is she a 'prostitute' where she can turn the use value of her sexual labour into exchange value where her body is the capital. Her sexuality always remains outside the 'domestic' proper. Child-birth also cannot create a social history of affective knowledge for her. She is neither a bourgeois mother nor a wet nurse nor a mid wife⁴ so that she can claim to possess some experiential knowledge within the gendered materiality of her body. What is the relevance of her reproductive system, her nurturing ability?

We do not get any answer to this in the narrative, which serves as an important suggestion. Why this silence? From Bagharu's account we get a picture of his mother Kurhani giving birth to Bagharu (TPB, p 95-96). Giving birth to an oversized baby alone in the jungle without

any preparation, the attached pain and courage needed to cut the umbilical cord herself with the weapon she was carrying, again creates a picture of child birth and mothering outside domesticity, which shows the limits of the meaning of a *domestic* mother and her agency over against the gendered aspects of giving birth. In case of Matharir Ma, the silence about this issue forces us to look at her body from a different angle, perhaps not as a woman, but merely a living creature, and focus on the way she has been 'made' a creature despite being a human being. "Her life is like the animals in the forest" (TPB, p 466), the way she lives, the capabilities she has acquired "[o]n the sharp and alert feet of the animals Matharir Ma returns home" (TPB, p 491). She is not the primordial mother though she has given birth to many sons. She cannot remember the number of her progeny; she confuses their faces in the multi-ethnic crowd gathered at the opening ceremony of the Tista Dam. All the faces look like her sons; she had been impregnated by men from different communities. But the physical experience of being a mother and the memory of mothering so many sons fade in her mind just like the memory of eating something sweet, the memory of the taste of cooked food (the memory of civilization itself?). What remains awake in her is hunger. And she is the cleverest hunter within the forest. The narrator even says that she searches for her long lost sons the way daily she searches for food. Search for food becomes the ultimate living pattern for Matharir Ma.

...Hence Matharir Ma has to go into the forests. Her body has adopted the forests...It would have been better if she had her eyes under her chin.

This is her work for the whole day. She has a sturdy stick in her hand, quite heavy, a branch of the shal tree, wrenched from the tree. It seems heavier when she is hungry. That is her weapon. It has an angle at the bottom. It has been broken keeping that angle intact, so that, if any small animal happens to come within the periphery of that stick which can be Matharir Ma's food, the stick breaks the animal's neck. Sometimes Matharir Ma pierces an animal using the stick as a spear, the way people kill fish. Again sometimes she brings up the stick on her head to crash it down like an axe in a fraction of second. At these moments Matharir Ma's whole body gets awake. In the twilight of the forest — in the background of shal-shegun-khayar-arjun trees — Matharir Ma becomes a tree too, her hands go up and down sharply with such force that they seem like a tree that has become alive in a storm. In that up and down motion, the materiality of Matharir Ma's

body is engraved, with the strength of that body she has given birth to eight or ten sons. (TPB, p 453)

As readers, we can see that the narrator displaces the logic of the evolutionary narrative in two ways. In the logic, the family is the first step to a collectivity where female bodies are socialized in an affective coding.⁵ Matharir Ma does not go through this machinery. She must have had affect, but the discourse of her affect cannot be understood and translated through this methodological approach. It is always beyond our existing parameters. Secondly, Matharir Ma, the hunter, breaks the gendered divide in both the androcentric traditional model of evolution and its feminist criticism referred to in section 1. Traditionally, the hunter-gatherer dichotomy along the line of gender and the gendered division of labour posits (male) hunting behaviour as the rudimentary beginning of social and political organization.

In a very real sense our intellect, interests, emotions, and basic social life — all are evolutionary products of the success of the hunting adaptation...the biology, psychology, the customs that separates us from ape — all these we owe to the hunters of time past. (Washburn and Lancaster, 1976, pp 293, 303)

This discourse depicted only male hunting abilities as skilled⁶ or socially oriented and socializes women's labour — mainly gathering and nurturing, the domestic labour, as biologically given, constrained by the very nature that the male labour transforms actively according to the need of the society. Feminist anthropologists and primatologists tried to transform women from a passive, sexual resource for men to active agents of evolution and changed the evolutionary importance of gathering activities by depicting them as skilled and knowledgeable⁷.

Matharir Ma, being in a self-sustaining "autonomous" and "independent" system, is a hunter. She does not have a society/domestic space any more which can divide her work for her in a gendered way. She is a gatherer as well. She picks up fire wood, collects salt, and finds eggs and extracts rats from the rat-holes. But, do these activities get the status of a skill, and can the reader recognize them as ability and capacity, as an improvisational skill which is a form of intelligent action? If Matharir Ma's body is that medium through which she lives, if her body and its arrangement within that time-space co-ordinate help us to read her, is there anything glorious in her living? Do her actions

depict an application of techniques which gradually will transform nature?

The answer is 'No'. Debes Roy does not create that scope for Matharir Ma. Instead he prepares a space where Matharir Ma, sometimes eager to enter into the flow of civilization, fails to do so. Perhaps because of the sheer materiality of her existence, perhaps because of her foreclosure within the narrative of Indian domesticity and modernity, there is no place that the narrator can allow her to engage with, or allow us to engage with her. Because, the narrator says, it is not possible to write about her experience — language shows its own limitations at those moments. Only a kind of bestiality has been allotted to her, "She is as alert as a hen in the forest everyday, solitary as a *guin* snake, terrifying as a *gokhro* snake, but, when she comes to the market she cannot do anything but unwind her body like an old (*teen kal perono*) hag" (TPB, p 454). She will be just outside the margin; even domestic dogs cannot enter her space. She will lack the basic tools to become the subject of history, even of her own, irrespective of how much she hunts everyday for her survival. "She can collect a good amount of salt, but where does she find an utensil?" (TPB, p 453), or "She can buy rice, but where does she find fire?" (TPB, p 454). Even "[w]hen ill she enters into the forest and chews leaves" — this action does not liberate her from her animal-like existence, does not qualify her as woman resourceful with the knowledge of traditional healing processes⁸. At the level of language, the author creates a distance between a knowledgeable body and a merely instinctive body. It is a moment of sheer primitivism that I fear to approach. Here I restrain myself from talking about some feminine/gendered knowledge as Matharir Ma does not give me the opportunity to do so. She offers a space of difference, a limit to the methodology to read and write her — does she, a gendered subaltern, and her body, become the last instance to echo Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak?⁹

Does the post-developmental thought of Shiva take care of Matharir Ma? Does Matharir Ma have a 'feminine principle'? What is 'feminine' for her? What is a Third World woman? Can she be understood in terms of any homogenized category? What is the theoretical framework of 'difference within' for her? I really wonder whether the terms — *prakriti* and *shakti* — subtly connote a neo-Hindu paradigm where 'the feminine principle' can be translated into an Orientalist feminism¹⁰. Where are

the coordinates of caste/ethnicity and gender in Third World ecofeminism to understand female bodily experiences and performances in a complex matrix of Indian nationhood, modernity and gendered ethnicity?

III

When the author describes the flood and Bagharu, who was appointed the guard of the shal trees by his master Gayanath, he says, "as if Bagharu wants to think like this" (emphasis mine). Bagharu may want to think of letting the flood water remain so that his master does not find him, so he can escape. But the narrator continues: "It is not that Bagharu can think like this. He does not have the practice of thinking this much. He can only think through his body." (TPB, p 299)

"...Bagharu cannot even have a dilemma. It appears that he does not have a mind, so does not have any dilemma. If we are to support this, we will have to support that he does not have a mind, but a body — his everyday living is lived through the materiality of this body." (TPB, p 347)

Possibly, we are forced by the narrator to look at it the other way round. If Matharir Ma, who "does not have a thought", cannot be strong and clever enough to build a *than* (a small temple) near the National Highway (TPB, p 441), if Bagharu who cannot even construct an intelligible sentence when asking the tea garden babu for a job (TPB, p 137), what would help to assimilate them into the transactional forces of the nation state? Should we look at a different form of expression, a different language? Perhaps not in merely words or syntax or textual meanings, but in their way/s of living, in the way their bodies perform within the taskcape of their immediate habitat that we need to consider their language as a set of signs¹¹. While reading body as the assignment of subjectivity, we should remember here that "there is no body outside of power, for the materiality of the body — indeed, materiality itself — is produced by and in direct relationship to the investment of power" (Butler, 1997, p 91).

But are these signs easy to decipher? The tea garden babu does not understand the physical cues that Bagharu gives to make his intentions clear. Suhas, the Naxalite-turned-Government Survey Officer takes refuge in metaphorical language when he empathetically tries to understand Bagharu's alienated existence, his corporeality, his less-than-

human presence within Gayanath's domain, among the local multi-ethnic population in the survey area. On behalf of Suhas, the narrator sees,

...Wet from top to bottom, whole body watery, a wet rag clinging to the thighs. The man stands like a drenched shal tree. (TPB, p 68)

But this Bagharu is like an old shal tree — to stand here he needs to cover everyone with his moss fungus ridden body. As his rag is camouflaged with his body he looks like a real tree...His skin is like the bark, he does not have any language or expression, his hair does not have any colour. (TPB, p 89)

In the last section of the novel *Tistaparer Brittanto* ('*Parishishito*'), in the 219th chapter, at the crowded inaugural ceremony of the Tista barrage, Bagharu and Mathari happen to meet. The Mathari-Bagharu conversation goes something like this:

- Here is Tista? Tista River?
- Not know.
- You do not know your Tista River?
- Not know.
- Here they have erased Tista River?
- Not know.
- Have they built a new river? Here?
- Not know. (p 503)

Bagharu does 'not know' 'this' Tista because he does not know about the dam, the barrage, the language of economy and development that gives Tista a new identity as a viable resource of hydro-electricity.

But does he know the language of rejection? What about Bagharu's consciousness? Repeatedly the narrator reminds us that the way Bagharu is being represented as a thinking self within the textual space, may not be the way he *is*. Language is not adequate to 'write' Bagharu. The narrative straddles two kinds of rejection made by Bagharu. He first appears in the darkness, intoxicated, addresses the Magistrate and withdraws his right — "*chhari dichhu*" — from the land that Gayanath has captured by manipulation. He leaves the banks of Tista in the final page of the novel. He leaves, because the forests of *shal* trees, flocks of deer, elephants, birds and all the reptiles of these forests will leave. Bagharu is only meaningful in these forests; he becomes Bagharu in relation to these creatures and trees. So he leaves.

Bagharu has no economy, no production. He only has a body. On the banks of new Tista, this body cannot survive. By leaving this barrage, Bagharu rejects the economy of the barrage, rejects development. Bagharu can speak, but he does not know the language of rejection. He has a body. Through that body Bagharu rejects all this. (TPB, p 504)

When Bagharu was offered flood relief he says, "*mor na nage*", I don't need (it). He fails to understand the offer to sell the shal trees and the stealing of shal trees as stealing in the Bathán, the jungle habitat of the buffalos/*mohish* under the supervision of a *moisthal*/caretaker. Does he understand the language of culture and civilization? Is the sheer corporeality of his existence a pure state of being? Or, is it a forced marginality imposed by Gayanath and finally the nation state that pushes him back to pure materiality, without any consciousness of 'history'? We fail to understand how far his corporeality is produced by the dominant forces and how far his physicality and action reflect his own subjective being if we don't situate his actions within a context, this context being his relationship with nature.

In Gayanath's *jot* i.e., the territorial expansion of his property, Bagharu is converted to merely a body, a corporeality, not-fully-sexed yet ("*batod*" as Gayanath addresses Bagharu¹²), a pre-discursive, speechless, negligible thing, "*Chari den Sir Aw to Bagharu*" ("Leave it Sir. It is simply Bagharu", TPB, p 63).

When Bagharu is exiled to the Bathán by Gayanath so that he cannot re-claim his land, we can see a sense of freedom emerging in Bagharu's mind. The chapter 'Bagharubari' (if we follow the Rajbongshi use of the word *bari* we may translate it as Bagharu-field, though in mainstream Bangla *bari* means house) starts with Bagharu's declaration that everything belongs to Gayanath, a statement which dissolves into his unstoppable laughter at the end. He continues to laugh because he realizes that in the Bathán, Gayanath would never find him. Gayanath doesn't know where the Bathán is in the dense forest. The Bathán doesn't know the name of the father. The phallus named Gayanath remains suspended there, its power invalid. Bagharu's journey towards the Bathán and his way of living in the Bathán offer us an opportunity to focus on Bagharu as the agent of knowledge. There his performing body attains an epistemological status.

Does the forest and Bagharu's living inside the forest glorify Bagharu's life performance? The way he engages in an emotional bond with the dog, the bird, the buffalos, the shal trees in the flood water and the flock of birds that takes refuge in those shal trees, shows a particular relationship between the human being and his non-human other. This relationship doesn't conform to the evolutionary pyramid with the man at its apex nor to the conception of human body as a closed and autonomous system. The dialogic moments between the dog, Bhokha, and Bagharu are both linguistic and bodily. The author exhausts 3 chapters (179 lines nearly) to depict the moments of interaction between a man and a dog, the way they come to know each other and choose to stay together. "[t]hey have not yet engaged their eyes, have not rubbed each other's skin. They don't know each other's language yet. At least they need to know that" (p147) From the initial unfamiliarity to their tactile proximity, the dog tastes and smells Bagharu's body which in turn reciprocates the canine movements to open up a phenomenological arena of familiarity, a bodily bond. "Bagharu feels pleasure (*aram*) from that warm and rough tongue licking the old scar on his back. The scar trembles from the pressure of the tongue. It gets wet with the saliva." (p 149). Their mutual belongingness to each other, the dog-man bond doesn't qualify Bagharu as the master, rather it constitutes a system where both of them can reside, being open to each other emotionally and physically. The way the dog feels comforted by the smell of Bagharu's body, from the way Bagharu feels the call of a male bird inside him in order to reciprocate to the female bird's call ("Bagharu can feel that a desired vibration of the call is going down from his throat to the inner parts of his body"), the way Bagharu gets frustrated when the female bird doesn't call back ("*Shalo!* You're searching for a partner inside the jungle! Can't you see the man around?", p 161) — all this creates another definition of a human body where the body becomes a complex habitat for both human and animal, because there is no boundary between these two worlds.

It is Bagharu's experiential world that has been celebrated throughout this section of the novel, from 'Bagharu in Exile' to 'Return of Bagharu', even in the gushing flood water in the latter section. In this portion of the narrative, to grasp Bagharu's relationship with the other, both Code's model of knowing other people (Code, 1993, p 15-48) and McClimock's discourse about the agency of the object of investigation,

that critiqued the logic of one-way dialogue with a fixed and hierarchized knowledge-emanating centre and a passive recipient, are of great importance. Code's model moves from the 'S knows that p' to 'knowing how to do it', from a disengaged knower to a relational and enmeshed kind of subject whose relationship with the other — the object to be known — determines the process of knowing, which is not abstract anymore. It is embodied knowledge, with and of the body; the experience of the body constitutes the epistemological foundation for knowing the other.

As we have already seen, feminism proposes and qualifies this knowledge as 'Gender-experiential knowledge' where the female body and feminine experience are explored to critique the objective androcentric bias of traditional sciences. As Code says,

...prompted by a conviction that gender *must* be put in place as a primary analytic category, I start by assuming that it is impossible to sustain the pre-assumption of gender-neutrality that is central to standard epistemologies...But, gender is not an enclosed category, for it is always interwoven with such other socio-political-historical locations as class, race, and ethnicity, to mention a few. (Code, 1993, p 20, emphasis mine)

But, I would like to argue that it is the multiplicity of location that would not allow gender to remain as a static analytical category. Our aim is not understanding gender as the constitutive element of being in a complex network of multiple locations as proposed by Code. Rather, gender needs to be understood outside the bi-polar essentialization of the sex/gender divide that has been theoretically developed by feminists¹³. As it was difficult to delineate something called the essential 'feminine' in the life and performances of Matharir Ma, similarly it is Bagharu's bodily engagements with nature that does not secure a bi-polar gendered universe. Rather, Bagharu's body becomes the space where the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' co-exist, thereby blurring the essentialized parameters of gendered qualities/attributes.

Bagharu has known these songs the way he learnt walking or speaking...the sense of separation, biraha, of the moishalni¹⁴ is of Bagharu himself, Bagharu is the moishalni. Her biraha, is for moishal Bagharu too. Bagharu knows the Bathan, Bagharu knows the buffalos. Bagharu is the moishal himself. It is not at all difficult to transcend his being as a non-moishalni with all these experiences...Bagharu, *she*, is in separation with himself. (TPB, p 167)

The way Bagharu is gendered in the narrative shows neither an ontological masculinity or femininity, nor their performances; rather, it offers us another performative aspect of gender which may be produced as the 'style of being'¹⁵ of Bagharu in the specific location where he resides. It problematizes the notion of experience as ontologically gendered. This idea is initiated in Bagharu's description of a once-wild female buffalo, the oldest Buriyal. "She is not anybody's mother here. But when she stands in the herd of buffaloes, it appears that everybody had once come out of her womb" (TPB, p 173). Here, motherhood is not biologically oriented; it is a matter of performance.

This gets extended when Bagharu acts as the midwife of a she-buffalo at the moment an eclipse occurs inside the forest.

As if Bagharu knows the calculations: when to be slow, and when to be fast, as he pushes his hand so that 'the calf can come out from the belly wet smeared in body fluids and blood and can stand on its legs'. At that very moment, in the sky, with the darkness imposed on the Sun within the flawless fraction of a second through the conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion among the millions and millions stars and planets, Bagharu's calculation was more accurate than all of theirs. (TPB, p 184)

Feminists have defined the erasure of the midwives in the 20th century from the arena of obstetrics as the replacement of practical knowledge with the propositional, due to the prominence of the male physicians/obstetricians. They have critiqued this as an erasure of gender-experiential knowledge (Dalmiya and Alcoff, 1997, p 217-144). Feminists proposed a practical way of doing things, a process of 'knowing how', where the subject of knowledge is relational, enmeshed and bearing the knowledge emanated from her bodily experience. By virtue of giving birth a midwife attains an experienced body/experiential knowledge with which she assists other women in giving birth as an engaged knower.

Here, gender acts as the constitutive element in knowledge production and dissemination, whose viability I want to question by analysing both Matharir Ma and Bagharu. My question would be if human bodily experience has a constitutive role in subjectivity and knowledge, how can we engage with the location of that body, the production of the body through experiences of being gendered, classed, raced, casteed or ethnicised? Moreover, how can the experience of a body be understood in terms of sexual difference?

When the sun is on the verge of eclipse, "Bagharu takes up the calf in his hands, the calf remains coiled the way it was inside its mother's womb.... as if Bagharu's chest is its second womb." (TPB, p 186) Thus, Bagharu becomes the midwife and the mother without having given birth. He can transcend all the biological determinants to become a woman, to take up a 'feminine' role, resonating with theorists who said: "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex...Even becoming sexed must be conceived in another way." (Butler, 1990, p 144-145, 1994, p 9-11, 107-109). In this theoretical paradigm, the causal explanatory framework of sex/gender dichotomy is critiqued and replaced by a feminist phenomenology where maleness and femaleness as styles of being cannot be pinned down by assigning a common form as attribute. Gendered identity is not a collection of actions, but a way of acting, a style of being. There is no core, no specific invariant. (Heinämaa, 1997, p 289-305).

During the high eclipse *the bird* returns in a premature darkness. Bagharu can sense from *her* call that inside her body the heart is beating faster. "He can see the movement of the yet-unseen-bird that she is calling with the wholeness of her body. The bird again calls in a thick, deep and rhythmic voice, 'k-aw-aw-k'" (TPB, p 188) Bagharu, who has not yet washed the birth-blood and mud from his body, calls with his whole body, not with his voice only. He calls with the sweat and breath of his body. The call trembles in his weariness. This time the bird answers back.

IV

What I intended to understand in this paper is whether feminists have created the space of an essentialized woman/female/feminine (the way she is gendered in *the* patriarchal normative to perform her body in a particular gendered/feminine way) while seeking for an ethics of difference to propose alternative epistemology or alternate scientific and developmental paradigms. My endeavor was to question how to go beyond the homogenized feminine experience, both as a universal category and as the Third World alternative. How can one initiate a discussion on the experiences of the subaltern/ethnic/local — those like Bagharu and Matharir Ma — who, not being able to step into the space of accession to sociality and collectivity, remain as an *aporia* in the

discourses of nationhood, development and modernity? The space which both Bagharu and Matharir Ma inhabit or belong to, can never share the decolonizing thrust in the arena of national identity, democracy, justice, rights and capitalist development. Not being able to enter into the arena of organized labor, they remain erased in the discourses of nation state. Here, a prioritization and privileging of the materiality of female body and subaltern experience would be a mythologizing effort which would fail to contextualize the dynamics of experience and 'subjectivation' of the body.

The phenomenological account of the lived body and the lived world needs to be complemented by the awareness that there is an interaction between the lived experience, the imaginary, and the discursive and social construction of both. So, we need to focus that experience cannot be an ontological truth. (Butler, 1997)

Matharir Ma and Bagharu problematize the link between performance, experience and representation. The novel successfully carries the burden of skepticism regarding re-presenting the authenticity of experience and gender, gendered subjectivity and epistemology. In this regard I wanted to raise questions on the link between available elite methodologies and subaltern living processes and propose a critical reflection about the viable methodological tools to read the performances/organization of knowledge lived by Matharir Ma and Bagharu.

Translations from *Tistapuram* and *Tistaparer Brittanto* whenever quoted are mine. This approach to *Tistaparer Brittanto* has been inspired *Bangla Upanyase Ora* by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

1. This term was first used by F d'Eaubonne in "Feminism or Death", in E Marks and I de Courtivron (eds) *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.
2. "Let us reaffirm our ancient covenant, our sacred bond with our Mother, the goddess of nature and spirituality. Let us renounce the worship of angry gods wielding thunderbolts or swords." Says R Eisler in her "The Gaia tradition and the partnership future: an eco-feminist manifesto" as quoted by Victoria Davion, (Davion, 1994, p 24)

3. The legacy of the Enlightenment and Cartesian epistemology and its later infusion with positivist-empiricist principles proposed a propositional knowledge organisation under the Schema 'S knows that p' — where S stands for an individual objects cogniser and p stands for a proposition. This scheme constructed knowledge as universal, homogeneous, value neutral thus achieving a 'view from nowhere'. This caused an erasure of experimental ways of knowing.
4. I don't intend to focus on these positions as privileged ones. Within the discourse of patriarchy and modernity, each category has specific kinds of gendered marginality. But, their existence within or with respect to the mainstream society enables them to engage in different modes of transaction. Misrecognition and misrepresentation of the bourgeois mother/wet nurse/midwife can lead to a critique of the patriarchal systems they are belonging to. But, being foreclosed, Matharir Ma does not get the opportunity. She remains completely outside the imagination of womanhood and nation.
5. Engels, Friedrich, 1979, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, Pathfinder Press, New York.
6. Carlos Ginsberg has theorized hunting as an epistemological process by exploring hunting activities within an evidential paradigm. "... [h]e learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from the tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as traits of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed..." Carlo Ginsberg, 1992, "Clues: Routes of an Evidential Paradigm", in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp 96-125.
7. Works of anthropologists like Sally Linton Slocum, Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman in this respect have been discussed by Nancy Tuana (Tuana, 1997, p 22).
8. In the Amazon flood plain Mark Harris met Sofia who was nicknamed *tracajá* (river turtle) by the community due to her resemblance with that creature when she cuts jute in the river. Long periods in water gave her rheumatism which caused her switch on to other skills like fishing, planting crops and midwifery. Linked to her childbirth skills she was also known as *benzedora*, a traditional healer. Matharir Ma cannot qualify as her. Harris discussed here the importance of the practical knowledge and designated body-techniques and abilities of improvisation as forms of local knowledge. It is the question of capability, a form of community knowledge where the community has been understood in terms of the bodily performances of ability and skill without theorizing body as an analytical space, as a production of history and politics. Matharir Ma's marginality throws a skeptical

question to these kinds of exercises where the traditional/local/indigenous forms of perception and performance are seen as pure and beyond any kinds of context. Harris, M., "Riding a Wave: Embodied Skills and Colonial History on the Amazon Floodplain", in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology, Museum of Ethnography*, Stockholm, Vol 70:2 2005 (pp 197-219)

9. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'Women in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful"', *Cultural Critique*, No 14, Winter, 1989-1990, pp 105-128)
10. Shiva, being a Gandhian post-developmental, has a tendency to posit herself within an essentialized cultural difference between the East and the West and ends up valorizing a mythicized cultural space called pre-colonial India. Statement, according to Michel Foucault, is "the function of existence of language on the basis of which one may...decide whether or not [it] makel[s] sense. A 'statement' involves the positioning of a subject (the place of the 'I'), the particularity of the I-slot is a sign, through which "the position of the subject can be assigned". (*Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 1972, p 86) Bagharu's silence and his lack of the ability to make sentences intelligible to others demarcate a specific subject position, a process of the production of his subjectivity.
12. I am referring to the Althusserian notion of interpellation that is how the social subject is produced through linguistic means which would set the ground for Foucauldian notion of "discursive production of subject". In the Althusser's essay 'Ideology and ideological State Apparatus' the subordination of the subject takes place through language, as the effect of the authoritative voice that hails the individual.
13. Judith Butler (1990), Luce Irigaray (1984).
14. Moishal is the caretaker of the buffalos in the vast area of North Bengal and Assam who has to live in the jungle to nurture the buffalos leaving his beloved, moishalini, back at home. This situation of month long separation has given rise to a repertoire of songs named moishal geet which reflects acute passion and desperation (*biraha*) of the moishalini.
15. In phenomenological realization, the body is not an object, but a mobile perspective, condition of all objects. The relation between the subject/living perceiving body and the object is not causal or functional; rather, the body is intertwined with its objects. This way, sex/sexuality cannot be understood as attributes. Instead they are theorized as modes, as styles, of being; their unity is like a web or a fabric of partial and varied connections. I have understood the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as Sara Heinämaa analysed it in "Woman — nature, Product. Style?" (Heinämaa, 1997, pp 289-305).

Ipshita Chanda

REALITY RINGED BY A CIRCLE OF FIRE: LITERATURE AS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM?

The aim of the exchange which led to the papers collected here was to explore the relation between systems and the activity of knowing and ways of using this knowledge in realms outside the formalized and the disciplinary. Our approach to 'knowledge' in these deliberations was not only from an epistemological threshold but also from an experiential one, where experience was seen to be of various kinds, all finally contributing to the processes of life, individual and communal. Ways of knowing, we argued, are rooted in ways of living, whether these are formally systematized or not — hence they become responsive to material change, setting off dialectical exchange between practices and conceptions of self and system, knowing and living. We had a view of knowledge as knowing — knowing how to do things or things themselves, or knowing people or ideas. We also assumed that the means of knowledge acquisition were multiple, and in keeping with this multiplicity, she-who-knows could inhabit multiple subjectivities. Our interest in this process was twofold. First, as scholars of the human sciences which are accessed through language, we were asking how the activity of knowing was discursively constructed. How was 'knowing' the verb and 'knowledge' the noun, and the relation between them, represented to the subject and to those who were spectators of the acting out/manifestation of knowledge, in various language-formations? Secondly, as scholars of Comparative Literature, our concern was to understand how/if literature as a system could function as a source of knowledge, whether literature as a form of language use was a way of knowing, a medium of knowledge. If so, what was the nature of this knowledge, and how was it related to the language that was its vehicle?

However, those who responded to this frame of reference and accepted our invitation to reflect upon these questions pointed out that as scholars of literature, it seemed that there were questions whose

answers we had taken for granted. For example, as Syed Sayeed states in his essay in this collection, we have been ascribing the function of knowledge to that which may be accessed by understanding, and the reason for this is that we have misunderstood the functions of the extra-conceptual or connotative resources of language, which he calls linguisticity. These, he asserts, characterise literature, thus giving it "... a cognitive function but it is a mistake to identify it with knowledge understood as we normally understand the term". To respond to the issue brought up by Sayeed we must ask, how do we normally understand these terms?

Socrates criticises the rhapsode Ion by saying that he has no *technikê epistêmê* about Homer (532c). To Socrates, as reported by Plato, *technê*, correlated with the verb *epistasthai*, to know, is craft-like knowledge, that which guides, for example, the carpenter's use of materials. Then is *technikê epistêmê*, knowing how to do a specific activity, a kind of knowledge? In the dialogue with Ion itself, this craft-like knowledge is separated from *gnôsis*, which is associated with *eidenai*, idea. *Gnôsis*, correlated with *gignôskein*, recognition, is understanding. Are *epistêmê* or *gnôsis* then names of various cognitive processes that allow us to know/understand/perform in varying degrees, that ultimate unchanging world of forms that is first introduced to us in *Theaetetus*, and established as the object of the philosopher's knowledge in the *Republic*? The Beautiful is unchanging in appearance and form, and is similar to the Good and the Just. Therefore, says Plato in the *Symposium*, the Unchanging Forms of the Beautiful, the Good and the Just are not open to sense perception (211a-b). The sensual world, admitting change, is thus separate from the world of Forms, and the means of access to the latter is apparently *gnôsis*. The philosopher is supposed (through *gnôsis*?) to have a clear paradigm of each Form in his soul. After forms are introduced in the *Republic*, it is the case that, besides serving as paradigms for imitation, they are also the object of a more theoretical kind of knowledge. In the *Republic*, knowledge seems to mean a perceptual grasp of forms; indeed, the account attributes to the form of the good responsibility for the soul's having a vision-like grasp of the other forms. Socrates uses the words for knowledge that we have found in other contexts — *gnôsis* (understanding) and *epistêmê* (knowledge).

Another possible moment which might give us pause is Plotinus' contention that souls gain knowledge through the *nous*, which had first

occurred as a concept in Plato's divided line passage in *Timaeus* (511a-3). There, the intelligible world was divided into two realms — one accessed by *dianoia*, deductive reasoning, and the other by *nous*, the unhypothetical beginning point, the goal of the dialectic. Plotinus says that the soul gains knowledge through *nous*, which is non-discursive, but the soul's knowledge of it is through language (V, 9, 7; IV, 3, 18). For the Grammarian Bhartṛhari, all verbal discourse is meaningful in terms of our conceptual images and the words that symbolize them. A construction-free knowledge beyond the reach of words does not exist — all knowledge is interpenetrated with words, and it is impossible to have cognition free from word association, unlike the Naiyayikas and the Vaisesikas, for whom words were arbitrary conventions to serve as vehicles for their contents — which is why they are known as the Conventionalists in Indian linguistic theory. For them, the main purpose of language was to supply "an appropriate envelope for a non-verbal perception, to organize different perceptions in to a quasi-united whole" (Isayeva, 1997, 84-5). However the opposing view comes from the Non-conventionalists, propounders of *Vyakaran darsana*, the Grammarians of Indian tradition. Bhartṛhari posits the word within the very core of consciousness. As he says in *Vakya-padiya* (I, 123-124), there is no *pratyay*, expression/idea in this world order which is not *sahdanugama*, i.e., cannot assume the form of the word. Every kind of knowledge is expressed (*bhasate*) by words. If the consciousness lost its eternal similarity (*avabodhasya sasvati*) with *vagrupata* or the form of speech, light itself would cease to illuminate and re-cognition of this world would become impossible, since re-cognition (*pratyavamarsini*) is only possible through the light of speech.

It is perhaps due to the belief in the linguisticity of knowledge/understanding in both the Platonic system and among the Grammarians in Indian tradition that the need for some sort of idea about eternal forms arises. Individual utterances of the word are various and would have to be separated from the unchanging Word of which each utterance is a performance within a specific context. I refer to these stages in Greco-Roman and Indian traditions to draw attention to the nature of the relations between word, meaning, reality and convention. For me this constitutes a relation between the systems named language-as-medium, knowledge/understanding and literature. It appears that the nature of the medium of cognition, must enter into the analysis; more so when it is

also the medium of literature. Also, it is only on the basis of related parts in the system that we are able to differentiate between understanding and knowledge and speculate upon the function of language in literature with respect to both of these

The differentiation between understanding and knowledge can only be drawn out with respect to other stated categories, and that too stated in specific terms. Just as a quibble, one might submit that basing the ontology of literature or any other category upon the distinction between knowledge and understanding would mean simultaneous revision (if that is too strong a word, then perhaps we might say adjustment?) of those other terms with reference to which these two cognitive processes have been differentiated. Apparently, the grounds for distinguishing between understanding and knowing as different forms of cognition are by no means unchanging or firmly established. They may emerge when contextualised and differentiated with respect to specific cognitive situations.

We next turn our attention to language, the medium of cognition Bhartrhari says the perfect perception is that in which there is identity between the object, i.e., the *sphota*, and the form of its cognition, i.e., the sounds of the letters of the language. This is held to be a function of the mind rather than of any external sense. He characterises the conformity between the object and the form of cognition in the final intuition as *yogyata*, fitness, an adequation between the sounds and the *sphota* (*Vakya-padiya*, I 78-84). The conclusion is drawn by Mandana², "The revelation of an object clearly or vaguely is confined to direct perception. In the case of other means of knowledge there is apprehension of an object or none at all." (*Sphotasiddhi*, sutra 23) As J.N. Mohanty (2000) points out, the Indian epistemologies are causal theories. "Cognition is looked upon by the Indian theorist as leading to conative activity." (ibid 149) Also, "With regard to the empirical world, a primacy of perception holds good. All other *pramanas* presuppose perception..." (ibid) The idea of perception seems to be the most important one in Indian thought. "If Western epistemology, up until recent times, remained under the pressure of a large distinction between 'reason and' experience' ... (as alleged means of knowledge)..., the Indian thinker had no such distinction before her." (ibid 149-50)

This will cause us to ponder on Sayeed's definition of literature as using the extra-conceptual resources of language. The reader will have noticed that such a definition of literature may be valid in concert with

a particular idea of the relation between perception and conception, and their relation to a cognising medium, language. The question of separating perception and conception as cognitive processes and ascription of *epistasthai*, to know, to one and *aisthenesthai*, to perceive sensuously, to the other, can only arise if we find a way to refute the argument of Bhartrhari that "When the linguistic *bhavana* is restrained, no (practical) effect is produced from the nonconceptual (*avikalpaka*) awareness that rises with regard to objects." (*vrtti* on *Vakya-padiya* I 123-125) Unless language is activated concept-construction (*vikalpaka*) is not possible, whether that concept enables us to communicate perception or thought. Let us mention in passing also that *viklp*, the root word is associated with imagination, fantasy, to invent. From it arises the word *kalpana*, and Bhartrhari (*Vakya-padiya* 3.6.18) says, *dikkalaparikalpana*, the imagined scheme of time and space in this world, is established *chaitanyavat*, as in our consciousness. We seem to have arrived at the discursivity of the cognitive process.

In the circumstances, turning to cognitive science, we learn from Amita Chatterjee that "Understanding situated cognition requires some new conceptual tools and methods — one suited to the study of emergent, decentralised, self-organising phenomena". She describes how "cognitive scientists have used narratives to posit a body-transcendent knowing self", and points out that this is possible because narratives have a sincerity condition and retain a rationality of moves. Ironically, to any literary scholar in the post-Nietzschean universe, this will immediately be suspect — at the very least, one would question how this sincerity is constructed, and whose rationality may be counted as rational, not to mention the questions regarding the manifestation of these conditions in their medium, language. Chatterji is not unaware that "the familiar distinction between perception, cognition and action and that between mind, body and world need to be rethought and possibly abandoned — causing upheavals strong enough to demolish the existing boundaries in the domain of knowledge." Premonitions of that process are contained in Sundar Sarukkai's assertion that "there is no knowledge system which does not possess elements of the literary or the fictional imagination". This addresses our concern about the discursivity and the literariness (or to borrow Sayeed's terms, "the extra-conceptuality" or the "linguisticity") of the language of representation, even when what is being represented

is apparently science. The assignment of objectivity to science and its opposite to literature is traced by Sarukkai to what he terms a "self-consciousness" towards these orientations on the part of each of these systems. Demonstrating how "elements of the fictional and literary imagination" may be applied to both foundational and narrative fictions in science, Sarukkai urges us to reorientate our question: "Perhaps we should not begin by asking whether literature is related to knowledge, but by asking how knowledge systems are related to literature."

For us this marks the second stage of our journey into the relation between language, understanding / knowledge and literature. Literature is not only a particular kind of language use, a unique kind of language-experience, but there is also a particular aim to be achieved through that kind of language use and that sort of experience. An aim that, even if limited to affect alone, can produce a kind of affect that is not generally seen as produced by language. As Jagannatha remarks, poetry is *ramaniyartha pratipadakah sabdah*, words which bring/present a charming idea into existence. This *ramaniyata* that marks out the specific use of words in poetry gives rise to *lokottarahlada*, pleasure that is beyond mundane, ordinary concerns, and make visible certain forms of *jñāna*: consciousness, knowledge, cognition coming through *pramāṇa*. Perhaps it is because of this that the specific mode of language use in literature may be admitted to being a means of knowing and/or understanding?

Some exercises of this nature do occur in this volume as well. In two papers, contributors have chosen different genres of literature, and attempted to see how these genres construct knowledge through particular forms of language use and ordering. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay takes the story to the world outside and even beyond that, through an application of Heidegger's idea of "the locality of Being". Reading the narratives of pilgrimage in early India, Mukhopadhyay points out that here, earthly knowledge is completed or at least complemented, by knowledge of the divine, for the purpose of the pilgrim to be fulfilled. This casts the natural visible world in a different role, as a signifier of the sublime, an indicator of what may be known even though it is not seen. The thorny claims of historical truth versus fictional representation are elaborated by Kunal Chattopadhyay who reads Viktor Serge's trilogy about the fate of Russia from Revolution to Stalin in the context of Leon Trotsky's history of the same period. Chattopadhyay makes this distinction on two counts: Serge's

tracing of his literary genealogy to the great nineteenth century Russian novelists, and his use of the genre of witness novels based on *temoinage*, that gives him a scaffolding of experience from which to construct fiction. The question is — can such literarised experience be the knowledge based upon which, as Chattopadhyay argues, "history must be written"?

To engage with this question one must reflect upon the nature of experience in literature, as well as the nature of the literary experience. *Mythos* is the elevated language of 'high' art, as found in Homeric or Pindaric poetry, and in tragedy, and the plain unadorned *logos* is the language used by philosophers, even in its colloquial form, as in Socrates' dialogues. If we return to Socrates' criticism of the rhapsode Ion, the travelling singer who recites the Homeric poems for a living, then the function and nature of poetry that Plato wishes to outline is even clearer. Unaware of the moral implications of his recitals, and intent upon raising the passions through them, Ion the rhapsode is just like the Sophists — like them he performs for payment, without understanding or commitment. And like the rhetorician Gorgias of Leontini, he is unconcerned about the truth or the falsity of his words — what exercises him more is the effect they have upon the audience. In both these dialogues, and finally in the *Republic*, Plato has outlined his view of poetry by delimiting the various uses of language for different types of effects. Not stopping there, he has gone on to ascribe to poetry the characteristics that separate it from the other types of language use.

Classical Indian poetics investigates this unique type of language use in detail, first almost mechanically in the *Gūṇa* and *Rīti* schools, then gradually moving towards a theory of perception contained by and activated through language use in the Dhvanikara's theories and through Anandavardhan's commentary on his idea of *dhvani*. This line of thought culminates in the emphasis placed on *rasadhvani* and its philosophical explication by Abhinavagupta. The Dhvani school begins to reflect upon the evocative function of literature, which Bhartrhari had termed *vyangya* (*Vākya-pāṭi*, *karika* 93 of Brahma-Kanda) and *vyanjaka* (*karika* 97). Here *vyangya* means to signify, and *vyanjaka* is the word that is the means of this signification. Anandavardhana in *Dhvanyaloka* refers to Bhartrhari as the first among the learned Grammarians who used the word *dhvani* as articulated syllables, *śravyamaṇesu varīa*, rather than mere sound (*Dhvanyaloka* 1.13). Later scholars of poetics, to explicate the

theory of *kavya*, show that poetry, or the soul of the word, is created by *vacyavacakasammiśraḥ*, unity of the signifier and the signified. This is called *dhvani* due to its *vyanjakaṭva*, or ability to evoke/convey suggested meaning (Isayeva, 1997, 166). Both *abhidha*, the denoted meaning and *lakṣhaṇa*, the connotative meaning of the word are present, but do not hinder the suggested meaning, *dhvani*, that is not circumscribed by them. In the work of art created out of words, the *dhvani* is non-paraphraseable. It is not meaning. Can we differentiate *dhvani* from figurative language termed *lakṣhaṇa*, by using Paul Ricoeur's³ notion of *la métaphore vive* as opposed to *la métaphore morte*? The first has what Ricoeur calls a "(vehement) ontological effort that detaches the signification from its proper anchorage, liberates it, (and) like a movement, transports it into a new field ..." (quoted in Isayeva, 1997, 168). To cite Abhinavagupta's *Locana* in this matter, *vyaṅgyapradhānye hi dhvaniḥ*, that which primarily evokes/suggests (and by implication does not merely connote or denote) is *dhvani*. *Bhoga*, enjoyment, says Abhinavagupta, is not from poetic words, "but the sweet *asvad*, taste/experience born of the dispelling of deep darkness of *moha*, ignorance engendered by confusion....this is achieved by the work of suggestion/evocation (*dhvananavyapar*). Once this evocation/suggestion/*dhvani* is implied, the enjoyment of *rasa* is said to be achieved..." (*Locana* 2.4).

A particular form of language use, as we have seen in both the Greco-Roman and the Indian traditions, marks out literature. The Indian tradition further asserts that the 'meaning' of the literary text is not limited to the meaning of language alone, but is a function of its suggestive/evocative power. Language in literature bears the experience of perception and conception or cognition, in consciousness, and a special quality of language-experience, *rasa*, designates literary language.

But what may be the relation between evocation, reality and literature? Is *vyanjana*, suggestion through language, applicable in diverse ways — for example, where neither connotation nor denotation seem to be possible? To quote Heidegger, "...when the issue is to put into language something which has never yet been spoken, then everything depends on whether language gives or withholds the appropriate word." (1971). The paper by Epsita Halder included here stages one such possibility. It interrogates the representation of a threshold of experience termed subaltern and/or feminine, but expressed

in hegemonic patriarchal language and provides another boundary situation for the *vikalpaka* of literature and knowledge that we have tried to build up thus far. We were assuming that the acquisition of knowledge is also based in experiencing body (I use the noun without an article here to draw attention to the multiple possibilities of body-experience that go beyond social processes such as gendering or sexing). Inhabiting a body would mean amalgamating the traces of memory with immediate sensation, perceptual materials out of which knowledge may be constructed. Halder reads Debbs Ray's *Teestaparer Brittanto* (which she calls a 'subaltern' text) to demonstrate that characters in a fictional world may well be marginalized by the very language-world of the novel in which they appear. Even when the writer sensuously perceives the existence of the world of these characters, even when he creates numerous language-worlds other than his own in a polyphonic fictional space, he still cannot articulate the world they inhabit. He is only able to mark out, in language, his inability to do so.

This reactivates the idea of system, though Halder's essay does not refer to it in so many words. It proceeds, however, from the assumption that system underlies the relation between knowledge and language, even in literature. Since literature cannot but be communicated through language, by extension we may infer that literature may be bound by this idea of system through its communicative vehicle or medium. Even for those like Sayeed who would frown at this purely phenomenological position, the vehicle of their displeasure in the most secret recesses of the mind is still either the word or, now we may agree, the suggestion of absence that it evokes. The extra-conceptual as well as the conceptual resources of language are bound by the relations between words themselves. The extra-conceptual or sensual resources that language possesses (if this term may be permitted), its linguisticity, if we use Sayeed's word, must be constructed in relation to other words — or the uninhabited space marked out by their absence. Jacques Rancière (2004) comments

A way of writing without meaning anything, the way of reading this writing as a symptom that has to be interpreted...the 'indifference' of writing, the practice of symptomatic reading and the political ambiguity of that reading are woven in the same fabric. And this fabric might be literature as such: literature conceived neither as the art of writing in general nor as the specific state of language but as a

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historical mode of visibility of writing, a specific link between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things (ibid. 12).

This is not a new idea by any means. The 'linguistic turn' in literary criticism has been with us for about half a century now. As Sayeed points out, "the primary feature on the basis of which a literary text can be identified is that its effects are wrought through an exploitation of the extra-conceptual resources of language". What are these resources and what may be their mode of existence? Is it possible for linguistic utterance, whatever its form, to escape the "extra-conceptual resources of language"? And is knowledge purely conceptual, while understanding accrues to the extra-conceptual?

Again, it is unwise to confine ourselves to a pure, abstracted view of language or literature or the experience, knowledge/understanding that accrues to these. Literature is a manner of configuring sense data, using a certain medium. The medium itself is reconfigured time and again in the process of history, giving literature different definitions. In the western world, this history is one of movement from the material-as-word to the word-as-material. French philosophers who wrote after the phenomena of Mallarmé and Flaubert take this moment as marking the institution of pure writing, the moment of literature. Barthes (1964) differentiates the *écrivain* and the *écrivain* on the basis of the fact that for the former, writing is transitive, it refers to something other than itself, while for the latter, it is intransitive, it refers to nothing other than itself. Literature is that mode of being of language where it resists representation, and is revealed in its own complete materiality.

But of course, this is a historical moment. Let us reflect briefly on its genesis. In the Foucauldian Classical Age, the rules and hierarchies of representation hung onto a definite link between saying and willing. Voltaire contrasted the literary word in the time of Corneille with that of his own time. In the former time, the written word was addressed to an audience of orators, magistrates, preachers and generals — the word in literature then was the acting word. In Voltaire's time, the audience of the written word was, he lamented, "some young ladies and young gentlemen" — in other words, it could be anybody. As Rancière (2004) points out, in the pre-democratic times of Corneille, the "representational regime of writing was based on a definite idea of the speech act. Writing was speaking" (ibid 13). Plato contrasted the living logos planted in

the soul of a disciple by the master, to the wandering orphan letter, let alone in the world without a father to guide it, available to anyone: writing. Invoking Plato's logic of the proper (by it, everyone is required to be in their proper places partaking of their proper affairs), Rancière calls literacy the excess of words with respect to things — the silent word of writing that will circulate without 'legitimate' speaker and interlocutor, and will have the ability to sway, "making itself available both to those entitled to use it and those who are not" (ibid). This is the word written in Voltaire's time, the word that enters the literature of Flaubert, makes itself available to all, and causes writing to become a petrification of things.

From the time words were taken as symbols, words stood for things, and language was transparent, literature moved to the time when Don Quixote took the representational power of words to a dizzying conclusion, interrogating the very order of representationality in literature that worked according to the principle of resemblance. From the moment of Cervantes, however, this principle on which language use in literature was hitherto based began to be ironically reconfigured by literature itself — Don Quixote, after 700 odd pages of living by a/the book (literally) wishes to escape the order of literature once and for all and proclaims that he has returned to reality, reverting to his 'real' name. He has started signaling at least a difference between the order of literature and the order of the world, and beginning the questioning of representationality and transparency of language out of which discourse was fashioned.

It was literature in which this crisis was signaled, again and again across history. For example, the Marquis de Sade forced the limits of representationality by forcing language to represent every nuance of desire even as it was being experienced (and still had not been contained within the discursive order of sexuality). Here literature has outstripped discourse — language still has not the discursive density to lend solidity to what the innocents like Juliette or Justine indulge in, their actions are still bereft of meaning except the meanings of the verbs themselves. These verbs are totally transparent, they are what they do. Yet if that is what they mean, there is no way in which order may be maintained to accommodate them in a nominalist world. Literature in this period works at the edges of discourse to wrest for itself a 'meaning' independent of a way of 'being' in the world, and shows this endeavour in Sade by outstripping the order of meanings.

Once this tension between being and meaning is set in train, once it is clear that words may not refer to anything in the world at all, there is no containing it. Raphael's visit to the antique shop in Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*, reveals to him a world of things, "taken away from their everyday earthbound reality" — "the oceans of furnishings, inventions, fashions, works of art and relics" made up for him an endless poem. No longer are things only themselves, no longer do words represent them transparently — rather they are juxtaposed together in a different order by literature which "displays what they truly are, a phantasmagoric fabric of poetic signs" (Ranciere 2004). Balzac calls poet those whom Foucault called the new empiricists, and both for the same reason. They could show the hitherto unseen — unlike Byron who has expressed spiritual turmoil with some words, Cuvier the true poet of the times has built cities out of some teeth, forests out of some petrified traces. He has, Foucault says, "based syntheses in the space of representation, and by the correlative obligation... (opened) up the transcendental field of subjectivity and ... (constituted), inversely, beyond the object.... the 'quasi-transcendentals of Life, Labour and Language'" (Foucault, 1970, 250).

Here in the age of things as signs, literature is constructed out of the word as a sign. In Balzac's work, much more than in Byron's, literature in this period "unfolds the poeticality, the historicity written on the body of ordinary things" (ibid). Meaning becomes a mute relation of signs to signs the word constructs things, even things that were never seen in historical time, things that are beyond empirical evidence as of this moment, but exist in material reality, things that are evident to the senses only in their relations to other things. Things that are not only three-dimensional but also exist in a fourth dimension — time. They go beyond their surface materiality, and relate themselves, often unseen, to other things — it is such relations that make the world as we see it. And knowledge would now mean knowing these relations between things on the planes that Foucault marks out as quasi-transcendental, rather than the things themselves. Consequently, continues Foucault, "European culture is inventing for itself a depth in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their distinctive paths and routes but great hidden forces developed on the basis of their primitive and inaccessible nucleus, origin, causality and history."

Foucault sees in this movement the demotion of language to object, bound by system, or by those forces of origin, causality and history. Language is a thing itself. It is not transparent any longer, showing things through a glass darkly, but now possesses density. "The truth of discourse is trapped in its philology" says Foucault, because "the grammatical arrangements of a language are the a priori of what can be expressed in it" (ibid 297). On the one hand language allows exegesis, allows itself "to be traversed through and through by knowledge"; on the other, it is "also reconstituting itself elsewhere, in an independent form, difficult to access, folded back upon the enigma of its own origin and existing wholly in reference to the pure act of writing". This tantalizes Foucault :

...from the Romantic revolt against a discourse frozen in its own ritual pomp, to the Mallarmean discovery of the word in its own impotent power, it becomes clear what the function of literature was, in the nineteenth century in relation to the modern mode of being of language.... Literature becomes progressively more differentiated from the discourse of ideas and encloses itself within a radical intransitivity; it becomes detached from all the values that were able to keep it in circulation during the Classical Age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth) and creates within its own space everything that is a ludic denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible).... all its threads converge upon the finest points — singular, instantaneous, and yet absolutely universal, upon the simple act of writing". (ibid 300)

This long invocation to writing is made possible due to the freeing of word from thing and its becoming bound up with other words in specific relational ties. It is no longer the material object that language will show us, but the inner relations between bits and pieces of words. It is these relations that can make possible the designation of literarity, a world that exists beyond the solidity of things, in the allure of signification. It is not for nothing that semiotics binds the thing to the word in a specific yet arbitrary relation. Our knowledge of those relations, I submit, is the knowledge given to us by literature. We have arrived in the nineteenth century, and with us are Mallarmé and Flaubert, practitioners of what Foucault calls "literature as such", language whose peculiar mode of being is literary.

The extra-conceptual resources of language are at once sensuous and linguistic; as we have seen in Halder's essay, if they are not

linguistic, they are as yet available only through approximation — and then they can only be signified as inexpressible in language. One would have thought that without the vehicle of language, they would not enter into literature. But as we have seen, this is not the case. It is literature alone that they can enter, for the western view of literacy allows the excess of word over thing, of word over perception, maybe (if we remember the moment of Marquis de Sade) even word over sensation. Here, in a world where such a specific relation obtained between a system of meanings of words and a system of visibility of things, is what Borges saw

...the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth: I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe. (1973:20)

What Arjuna saw, however — again a vast if somewhat more ordered plethora — was it not also, and more than “that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe”? The mode and context of their seeing defines the difference between the western view of literature, and the Indian one. This difference is one that will excite comparison or derision, depending upon the proclivities of the reader — and in fact that is desirable, too. The unimaginable universe is just that which literature enables us to look upon — especially when it claims that it refers to nothing other than itself, for it is at that juncture that we come upon a series of questions that Foucault asks thus

What is man's being and how can it be that that being which could so easily be characterized by the fact that ‘it has thoughts’ and is possibly alone in having them, has an ineradicable and fundamental relation to the unthought? A form of reflection is established...that involves, for the first time, man's being in that dimension where thought addresses the unthought and articulates itself upon it (1970, 325)

Bhartrhari, it is said, dabbled in Buddhist philosophy in his youth and then settled (perhaps in the ‘illumination’ of steady middle age) back into the folds of Vedantic thought. It is from this threshold that he identifies the word with Brahma. “Whether (it) is heard as originating in the higher (*paramatra*) or in the inner (*svamatra*) self, it is only

through the word that meaning is established (*artho vidhiyate*)” (*Vakya-padiya* 129). The skeptical (and the modern?) reader will raise her eyebrows at this. But Bhartrhari continues, addressing the innate power of language: “(language has the ability) to make visible (*drśyate*) even when there is no substrate but only the efficient cause, as (words can make visible) the outline of a circle of fire (as) the form of reality (*vastavakara nirupana*)”. If language “withholds” the word, as Heidegger says, then it is the poet who uses the resources of suggestion to ring the form of reality, as does the circle of fire :

Only in image-filled days, from time to time, I have found most joy.
I look afar, no loom-woven clouds are in the sky now. And desirable too
That these prosaic clouds are now absent. The evening of this life
descends.

The moment for pouring out lifebreath, in the almost-dark of day's end,
the universe now much more clearly seen
More really apprehensible. Looking into the sky I see the evening star
has bloomed in course of time

The unglowing dark-hued sky is golden only with stars
Only at the close of symbol-filled days, the evening star shows itself
revealed.¹

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. The essays referred to here were first presented at the first seminar organized by the Centre of Advanced Study on “Literature as Knowledge System” held at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, in December 2005. Some presentations which were crucial to this over-view are not included here, but it is my privilege to note the debt I owe to them. First, the inaugural address given by Professor Sitanshu Yashashchandra, where the idea of *ramaniyata* as the special characteristic of *kavya* was introduced. Then, Professor Kapil Kapoor turned the discussion towards Indian linguistic philosophy through his paper on Panini, which I have used as a starting point for much of my own thinking. Finally, though the norm is otherwise, I transfer responsibility for whatever is worth contemplating in this essay to Professor Amiya Dev who continues to ring reality with (many, often overlapping) circles of fire.
2. Mandana. *Syatasiddhi* as translated by K.A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College Building Centenary Series, 25, Poona 1966, p 60. Cited in H.G. Coward and K K Raja, 1990, p57

3. Paul Ricouer, *La Metaphore Vive*, Editions du Seuil, 1957, Paris. Cited in Isayeva, 2004, n168. Translation mine.
4. *Deen*, (Day) from *Binoy Majumdarer sreshtha kobita*. (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1981) p 120. Translation mine.

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